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PRINTED IN THE UK

259

COVER ART BY MARTIN HANFORD · JUL–AUG 2015 · £4.99

INTERFACE

LOVE YOUR LOCAL SCENE
Jonathan McCalmont

CONTENTS

FUTURE INTERRUPTED
Jonathan McCalmont

TIME PIECES
Nina Allan

ANSIBLE LINK
David Langford

LOVE YOUR LOCAL SCENE
JONATHAN McCALMONT

Ask me what I mean by the word 'scene' and I will tell you of the night that they closed La Dolce Vita. Never more than a small night-club in the Swiss city of Lausanne, La Dolce Vita opened its doors in 1985 and rapidly established itself as one of the most respected rock venues in French-speaking Switzerland. In the fourteen years it took for La Dolce Vita to burn through its reserves of credit and municipal good will, the club's operators had lured dozens of fantastic bands to their tiny stage and encouraged the formation of dozens more. The night they closed La Dolce Vita, a load of local bands took to the stage to pay tribute and you could not only see the bonds that existed between the different acts but also hear the waves of influence that had rippled out from the few bands that had managed to find some measure of commercial success. The night they closed La Dolce Vita, I saw the Lausanne scene and I heard the Lausanne sound.

Last Summer, London hosted the first British Worldcon in nearly a decade. However, despite a home-court advantage at what turned out to be the biggest Worldcon in twenty years, the contributions of British editors, authors and fans were all but ignored by Hugo voters. Despite the incessant talk about diversity and the need to listen to a broader range of voices, the roar of American exceptionalism had drowned out the British sound and left the British scene with little to show for its hosting duties. This year's showing was even worse but then foreigners are always going to fare badly when American genre culture decides to tear itself apart in the name of progress and inclusivity.

Works like Paul Kincaid's *A Very British Genre* and Rob Hansen's *THEN* suggest that British genre culture has a history and feel all of its own. While the current climate makes it easy to forget that we are the inheritors of a unique cultural tradition, it is never too late to turn up the volume on that British sound. Fans, authors, editors, publishers and institutions need to start working together in order to re-create the type of self-contained cultural ecosystem that the globalisation of genre culture has so catastrophically undermined. I'm not calling for the crass, reductive nationalism that you'd associate with the likes of UKIP but rather a form of inclusive localism in which anyone who identifies with the history of British SF and its institutions can contribute to the 'local' scene. At the heart of localism is the idea that we should look to each other before we look further afield and I take this to mean that we should start asking our own questions, setting our own agendas and remembering that we are more than just a tiny province in an American genre empire.

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ISSN 0264-3596

Publisher
TTA Press, 5 Martins Lane,
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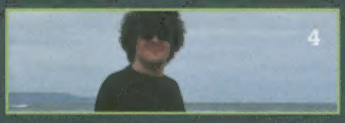
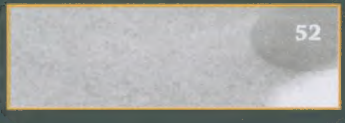
AL ROBERTSON: THE CORPORATE GODS
interviewed by Barbara Melville





INTERFACE

LOVE YOUR LOCAL SCENE
JONATHAN McCALMONT 1

FUTURE INTERRUPTED
JONATHAN McCALMONT 4

TIME PIECES
NINA ALLAN 6

ANSIBLE LINK
DAVID LANGFORD 8

FICTION

SILENCER – HEAD LIKE A HOLE REMIX
E. CATHERINE TOBLER 12
illustrated by Ben Baldwin
benbaldwin.co.uk

THE DEEP OF WINTER
CHRIS BUTLER 18
illustrated by Martin Hanford
martinhanford1974.deviantart.com

RUSH DOWN, ROAR GENTLY
SARA SAAB 34
illustrated by Richard Wagner
rdwagner@centurylink.net (email)

AFTER HIS KIND
RICHARD W. STRACHAN 44
illustrated by Richard Wagner

EDITED
RICH LARSON 52

MIDNIGHT FUNK ASSOCIATION
MACK LEONARD 56
James White Award Winner

REVIEWS

MUTANT POPCORN
NICK LOWE 66
films

LASER FODDER
TONY LEE 76
DVDs & Blu-rays

BOOK ZONE 82
books, including an interview with Al Robertson

JONATHAN McCALMONT'S FUTURE INTERRUPTED

ALL THAT SCIENCE FICTION ALLOWS

People used to say that self-publishing was going to revolutionise genre fiction. They said that genre imprints were out of touch and overly cautious. They spoke of creative bottlenecks and how authors were going to unlock the raw potential of genre by moving beyond the bean-counters and gate-keepers of traditional publishing. They said a lot about how self-publishing was going to change the world but the reality turned out to be a billion shades of grey and the occasional flash of colour such as that provided by Ian Sales' magnificent and ground-breaking *Apollo Quartet*.

Comprising three novellas and one short novel each set in an alternate history of NASA's Apollo programme, the *Apollo Quartet* uses a variety of literary techniques to explore the complex relationships between science, fiction, history, and the history of science fiction. Growing ever more sophisticated and ambitious with each volume, the *Quartet* is best approached in the order in which it was originally published: One, two, three and *oh-most-definitely* four.

Winner of the British Science Fiction Association Award for Best Short Fiction back in 2012, *Adrift on the Sea of Rains* takes place in a version of the 1970s where nuclear war has destroyed the Earth and left a group of astronauts stranded on the surface of the Moon. Written in a style that is almost as poetically desolate as the surface of the Moon itself, *Adrift* revels in a level of technical detail that you would normally associate with only the hardest works of Hard SF. However, where Hard SF uses technical detail as a means of promoting understanding and making things clear, Sales uses it as a smokescreen to conceal his characters' true feelings.

Trapped on the surface of the Moon and hoping that an old piece of Nazi technology will allow them to escape to another universe before they all die of starvation, the astronauts immerse themselves in checklists and maintenance protocols as a means of escaping the feelings of grief and terror that threaten to overwhelm them every time they look upon the irradiated wasteland that was once their home. Miserable, traumatised and trapped in a toxic 'Right Stuff' ideal of masculinity that precludes anyone discussing their feelings, the astronauts cling to the mind-crushing tedium of their daily routines as the misery and tension push them ever-closer to madness.

The second book in the *Apollo Quartet* also uses Hard SF tropes to pursue literary ends. Set in an alternate version of 1999 where the success of the Moon landings encouraged America to push on first to Mars and then to other solar systems, *The Eye With Which The Universe Beholds Itself* features an astronaut who is brought out of retirement in order to investigate an extra-Solar colony that has unexpectedly cut off all communication with Earth.

Eye sets the terms of engagement by immersing us in a world of lies and conspiracy. Universally recognised as the only Human to set foot on Mars, the novella's protagonist is horrified to learn that the secrecy born of his discoveries on the red planet has matured into a corporate culture dominated by paranoid gossip. Questions haunt the protagonist all the way to Gliese 876 but rather than answering his fellow astronauts' questions, the protagonist keeps the truth hidden behind a veil of secrecy: Classified, can neither confirm nor deny. Sales echoes these feelings of uncertainty with regards to whether or not the protagonist's wife has left him; like Schrödinger's Cat, the marriage is neither alive nor dead until someone bothers to open the box and check.

Eye is structured like a mystery but while the text of the novella uses certain themes to hint at an answer, the real solution lies buried in the book's appendices. Much like maps and glossaries, appendices have acquired something of a bad reputation in genre circles as they are usually a sign that authors have allowed their world-building to get away from them. However, while all of the *Apollo Quartet* books feature glossaries, timelines and other bits of lore, Sales uses his appendices not to flesh out fictional worlds but to destabilise them by blurring the line between reality and fiction. Little more than a whisper in the earlier books, Sales' postmodern tendencies are given full voice in the third book of the series.

Initially, *Then Will the Great Ocean Wash Deep Above* feels more like two separate stories than a unified narrative. The first strand

The Apollo Quartet uses a variety of literary techniques to explore the complex relationships between science, fiction, history, and the history of science fiction

is set in an alternate 1960s where an ever-escalating Korean War has allowed women to become America's first astronauts. Rich in period detail, these passages explore a singularly unpleasant female version of the 'Right Stuff' and ends with a female astronaut worrying about the militarisation of space as a spy satellite drifts beyond her reach.

The failure of the astronaut's mission dovetails mysteriously with the book's second strand about a navy diver who is called upon to collect a canister of film from the bottom of an oceanic trench. Upon descending to the bottom of the Atlantic, the diver finds a graveyard of planes and ships that appear on no maps or scans creating a sense that he has arrived in a place that simply should not be.

I say that *Ocean*'s two strands dovetail in a somewhat mysterious fashion as the strands unfold in two separate timelines: For the astronauts, the Korean War lasted until the 1960s. For the diver, men went to the Moon. However, while the two strands may be taking place in different timelines, there appears to be a connection between the failure of the astronaut's mission and the diver finding some film that causes the Cold War to turn hot. Sales accounts for this connection in a third act devoted to his characters' real-world counterparts and an invitation to compare and contrast the three different histories: Would the Korean War have turned nuclear had our world's diver been able to recover the film? How close did we come to an all-female space programme? You tell me.

The final book in the *Apollo Quartet* is also the most ambitious. *All That Outer Space Allows* is set in a version of the 1960s where one of the Apollo astronauts happened to marry a science fiction writer. At the beginning of the novel, Ginny is a woman who is trying to balance her desire to be an author with the demands placed upon her as an air force wife. Initially quite unpleasant, the sexism that Ginny encounters becomes downright dehumanising once her husband joins NASA. Unable to wear her own clothes and terrified of sitting down to write lest another astronaut's wife drops by to see her being a writer rather than a full-time wife, Ginny draws on her experiences at NASA and turns them into a beautiful story about the male tendency to make women and their concerns disappear.

Aside from being a character study of both an astronaut's wife and a female science fiction author from the 1960s, *All That Outer Space Allows* also constructs an alternate history of science fiction in which men are a Sad Puppies-style lunatic fringe proclaiming that "womanly gossip and high heels" have no place in a literature of ideas. One man's petulant fear that women will take his genre away is beautifully juxtaposed with a devastating final scene in which Ginny is suddenly brought to tears by the realisation that a man has taken not just her genre away, but everything she was and everything that she had ever hoped to be. Already powerful, this conclusion is rendered all the more unsettling and urgent by made-up critical essays and Science Fiction Encyclopedia entries written by male critics who are more than happy to downplay Ginny's influence and talk-up the role of male editors whilst erasing the contributions of women editors who actually did the bulk of the work on Ginny's story. The really horrible thing about Sales' fictional essays and encyclopedia entries is that they look just like those written in our world about real-life female science fiction writers of the '50s and '60s. Ginny's world may be fictional but it is far too close to our own for comfort.

From beginning to end, *The Apollo Quartet* is a tour de force. Complex, moving and technically ground-breaking, these books are a reminder that self-publishing should be about raising the bar and not sinking to the lowest common denominator.

NINA ALLAN'S TIME PIECES

PIGS MIGHT FLY

"I want to portray struggle. Drama comes out of conflict. If you portray a utopia, then you probably wrote a pretty boring book." (George R.R. Martin for *Entertainment Weekly*, June 3rd 2015.)

George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, together with its TV adaptation under the title of the first book in the sequence, *Game of Thrones*, is possibly the most popular fantasy series of our time. *Game of Thrones* has been regularly praised for its knotty political intrigue, its refusal to compromise in its portrayal of gritty, not to say grim, realism, and its conflicted, morally ambiguous characters. It is just as regularly disparaged for its heavy reliance on serial assassination and random bloodletting as its main plot driver, its privileging of 'events' over genuine character development and in particular its treatment of women and the sexual violence enacted upon them. Not occasionally but every week, as a kind of spectator sport.

I've not read *ASOIAF* – I simply can't justify the time commitment required of such an endeavour – but I have recently started watching *Game of Thrones*. Put simply, I wanted to know what all the fuss was about. I'm currently in the middle of Season 2, but have been unable to resist following various commentaries on the current Season 5 – again, I wanted to know what all the fuss was about. Not having read the books, I would probably have resisted weighing in on this discussion – everyone knows how unfaithful film or TV adaptations so often are to their source material, and so what right would I have to criticise Martin without knowing what he actually wrote? Martin's defence of the current season in *Entertainment Weekly* changed my mind on that. He didn't write it, but he clearly stands by it, and by the series as a whole. The piece went live a day or two after Episode 8 of Season 5, in which Sansa Stark is raped on her wedding night by the psychopath she was forced to marry, Ramsay Bolton. While some fans found the episode to be a logical development of the story as it unfolded, a significant number of viewers were upset and outraged at the brutality of what was portrayed. Let's have a look at what GRRM had to say about that:

"I'm writing about war, which is what almost all epic fantasy is about. But if you're going to write about war, and you just want to include all the cool battles and heroes killing a lot of orcs and things like that and you don't portray [sexual violence], then there's something fundamentally dishonest about that. Rape, unfortunately, is still a part of war today. It's not a strong testament to the human race, but I don't think we should pretend it doesn't exist."

It's a complicated argument, as Martin himself admits, and as many have pointed out, violence in *Game of Thrones* is meted out pretty much evenly to both men and women. I think the obvious flaw in Martin's reasoning though is that whereas the violence enacted on men is usually the result of decisions taken – strike and counter-strike, synthesis and antithesis, if you will – the violence enacted upon women is all too often simply the result of them *being women*. This seems particularly true in the case of Sansa Stark, whose rape in Season 5 has far less to do with the violence of war than with an upping of the stakes in the power play between one male character and another. Sansa is *currency*, in other words – as indeed she was shown to be from the very first episode. Sansa's whole destiny has been tied up in the idea of the sexual violence that might or might not be inflicted upon her. Is this lame excuse for a character arc not, at the very least, the product of lazy thinking?

I think it's unfair to concentrate criticism solely upon *Game of Thrones*, a fantasy series which does at least have the advantage of having some women in it, women who, while their characterisation might leave plenty to be desired, have independent, complex personalities and even, in some cases, a measure of control over their own destinies. There are plenty of epic fantasies that come way ahead of ASOIAF in being utterly pathetic and clueless with regard to their portrayal and non-inclusion of women – there's *The Lord of the Rings*, for a start – and perhaps the most interesting and disquieting thing about Martin's piece in *Entertainment Weekly* is what it reveals about default assumptions in fantasy generally. Even if, as Martin insists, "most epic fantasy" is about war and "heroes killing a lot of orcs and things", is it not inadequate – an act of imaginative

bankruptcy – to default to a set of clichés that have long outworn their usefulness, an iconography that has its basis in an *already* corrupted and falsified version of the Middle Ages, in which men were men, knights rode forth from castles and women stood around waiting to be raped or have men kill dragons for them?

I find Martin's assertion earlier in the article that "there were of course some strong and competent women" in the Middle Ages especially disconcerting as he seems to be suggesting that the number of intelligent, freethinking women in any given society is mainly dependent on the extent to which men are prepared to allow and encourage their wives and daughters to be those things. As opposed to the glaringly obvious reality, that it is not a woman's propensity to *be* strong and competent that changes with time, but rather her freedom to control her own agency. It is not that women do not have stories, but that their testimonies are routinely obliterated. Martin speaks out strongly against the "Disneyland Middle Ages" as portrayed in earlier fantasy epics. A pity then that *Game of Thrones*, far from showing the complex reality of mediaeval society, comprises

The idea that it is dishonest or in some measure unrealistic to portray a world in which the power struggles, the conflict, to use GRRM's word, are not based around the rape, objectification or subjugation of women is just bollocks

the same regurgitated mess of stereotypes based loosely upon the authorised version of that reality as set down by the men of the time, whose interests were entirely vested in validating the status quo.

I mean, it's almost as if some writers find it easier, more enjoyable even, to write fantasy set in a thinly fantasised version of an earlier era because *everyone agrees* that women were second class citizens back then, so it's OK to show that, roll around in it a little bit (*Mad Men*, anyone?).

The idea that it is dishonest or in some measure unrealistic to portray a world – with or without dragons – in which the power struggles, the conflict, to use GRRM's word, are not based around the rape, objectification or subjugation of women is just bollocks, frankly. More than that, it is an abnegation of what *fantasy* – the exercise of the imagination – is all about.

Take the movie *Mad Max: Fury Road*, which arguably contains some of the most thrilling battle sequences in recent fantasy (no orcs, I'll admit that, but it does have a def metal guitarist on a war rig) *and* manages to run for a full two hours without including a single rape scene. Does the film appear "fundamentally dishonest" about violence or war? I don't think so, no more than any other action movie, anyway. It is not that sexual violence and men's power over women are subjects absent from *Mad Max: Fury Road*, far from it – both the Wives and the Milk Mothers are effectively enslaved at the start of the film, and Furiosa herself is understood to have been the victim of terrible violence. It's just that the methods deployed in portraying them – and in telling women's stories generally – show a level of imagination and originality that is consistently, nefariously missing from *Game of Thrones*. Furiosa is more than capable of killing her own dragons. The Wives can be women without becoming objects. The biker women have their own history, their own mythology, their own internal battles too, probably. Women, in this movie, have equal plot interest, equal billing – and there's nothing by-the-numbers,

dishonest, or "affirmative action" about it. It's just a story that will shake you to the core. What it is not is a boring utopia.

What remains most depressing about *Game of Thrones* is its conformity, its insistence that fantasy should not be revolutionary, but reiterative. Here's GRRM again: "Just because you put in dragons doesn't mean you can put in anything you want. If pigs could fly, then that's your book. But that doesn't mean you also want people walking on their hands instead of their feet."

So women with agency and independence are the fantasy equivalent of people walking on their hands, are they? It's not as if there aren't already a whole battalion of writers actively exploring the fantastical possibilities of *new* world orders, new magic systems and power struggles and generation-spanning family rivalries. Paul Park's *Roumania* quartet, Steph Swainston's Castle books, more recently Kameron Hurley's Bel Dame Apocrypha and Zachary Jernigan's Jeroun novels – all in some sense epic, all rich in intrigue, gamesmanship, tension and even violence. Not a lot of rape, though, and I don't remember anyone walking on their hands.

I'm sorry, Mr Martin – the kind of authenticity that can be bought off the peg at mediaeval central casting just doesn't cut it, not any more. Game over.

COMING SOON

One highlight of issue #260, out in September, is Jeff Noon's *Interzone* debut with the extraordinary 'NO REZ', illustrated by Dave Senecal

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Dept of Prophetic Speech: 'I am Groot.' (Michael Moorcock, *The War Hound and the World's Pain*, 1981)

Rhianna Pratchett made it clear: 'To reiterate – No I don't intend on writing more Discworld novels, or giving anyone else permission to do so. They are sacred to dad.' (Twitter)

Awards. *John W. Campbell Memorial:* Claire North, *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August*. • *Arthur C. Clarke:* Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven*. • *Compton Crook* (first novel): Alexandra Duncan, *Salvage* (2014). • *Lambda* SF/F/H category: Chaz Brenchley, *Bitter Waters*. • *Nebulas*. Novel: Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation*. Novella: Nancy Kress, *Yesterday's Kin*. Novelette: Alaya Dawn Johnson, 'A Guide to the Fruits of Hawai'i' (*F&SF*). Short: Ursula Vernon, 'Jackalope Wives' (*Apex*). Dramatic: *Guardians of the Galaxy*. YA: Alaya Dawn Johnson, *Love is the Drug*. • *SF Hall of Fame*: James E. Gunn, Georges Méliès, John Schoenherr and Kurt Vonnegut. • *Sturgeon Award* (short): Cory Doctorow, 'The Man Who Sold the Moon' (*Hieroglyph*).

Michael Bond, creator of Paddington Bear, received the CBE in the 2015 Queen's Birthday Honours. Other genre-related honours included an OBE for Steven Moffat, believed to have something to do with *Doctor Who*, and a CBE for the ubiquitous Benedict Cumberbatch. Down Under, ultra-prolific romance writer Valerie Parv – whose sf venture is *Birthright* (2012) – became a member of the Order of Australia.

Margaret Atwood is the first of 100 contributors to 'Future Library' (created by artist Katie Paterson), which will collect one unpublished MS a year and print them all in 2114 to coincide with *The Last Dangerous Visions*. Until then, fandom will be on tenterhooks as to whether the Atwood story contains talking squid in outer space. (BBC)

Godzilla, alias Gojira, has been made an official resident of Shinjuku Ward, Tokyo, for 'Promoting the entertainment of and watching over the Kabukicho neighborhood and drawing visitors from around the globe in the form of the Godzilla head built atop the Shinjuku Toho Building.' (Rocketnews24.com)

DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK

Also, presumably, for services to urban renewal by stepping on local eyesores.

As Others See Us. The *New Statesman*'s Rachel Cooke was swift to spot the damning flaw in the BBC's *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*: the acting may be fine but it's 'aimed, it seems to me, at a generation brought up on Harry Potter and still feebly in mourning for it. I mean, there are CGI talking statues, for heaven's sake.' Christopher Stevens at the *Daily Mail* was horrified that it 'is not Poldark. / There were no damsels with heaving bosoms, for a start. In fact, almost the only female under the age of 40 was lying on a couch, coughing herself to death with consumption.' Which leads with inexorable geometric logic to: '…this mishmash of folklore and historical fantasy is revealed for what it really is – a J.K. Rowling rip-off.' Research datum: Susanna Clarke began writing her novel several years Before Potter.

The Doctor is Everywhere. During a recent (in the UK) TV episode of *CSI*, a dead man was revealed as having worked for accountants "Baker, Smith, Capaldi".

Cat Rambo has been elected as the latest President of SFWA.

The Weakest Link. 'This author described a Utopian republic in his 1966 novel *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*.' Contestant: 'Who is H.P. Lovecraft?' (*Jeopardy*) • 'Who created the characters Tweedledum and Tweedledee? Was it J.R.R. Tolkien, Lewis Carroll or Dr Seuss?' Contestant: 'Well it's not Lewis Carroll. He wrote *The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe*.' (BBC1, *In It to Win It*)

John Scalzi's $3.4 million deal with Tor, for thirteen books to be written over ten years (*Washington Post*), caused much comment online. Some of his sworn foes explained almost tearfully that this was a terrible tragic calamity, signalling the imminent End of All Things for both author and publisher.

Simon Pegg expressed cautious second thoughts about current superhero film blockbusters: 'Obviously I'm very much a self-confessed fan of science-fiction and genre cinema. But part of me looks at society as it is now and thinks we've been infantilised by our own taste. We're essentially all consuming very childish things – comic books, superheroes. Adults are watching this stuff, and taking it seriously! / It is a kind of dumbing down because it's taking our focus away from real-world issues. Films used to be about challenging, emotional journeys. Now we're really not thinking about anything, other than the fact that the Hulk just had a fight with a robot.' (*Independent*)

Thog's Masterclass. *Dept of Does My Mind Look Big In This?* 'And she being who she was, the back of her mind was a substantial thing.' (Ann Leckie, *Ancillary Justice*, 2013) • *Neat Tricks.* 'The six-year gap was conspicuous by its absence.' (Larry Correia, *Monster Hunter International*, 2007) • *Lesser Evil Dept.* 'The Mayor and the cops have tried really hard to keep it out of the papers. Or worse, the media.' (Christopher Golden, *The Shell Collector*, 2006) • *True Romance.* 'The penis passed from one mouth to the other, the tongues crossing like flights of swallows, lightly troubled, in the summer sky … when they are ready to leave Europe for their winter pilgrimage.' (Michel Houllebecq, *Submission*, trans Adam Gopnik 2015) • *Wrath of Ouroboros Dept.* 'He felt once again the desire to bite his own backside in fury.' (Andrzej Sapkowski, *Blood of Elves*, 1994 trans 2008) • *Feminist Sympathy Dept.* 'Connie had a wry, compact intelligence, a firm little clitoris of discernment and sensitivity…' (Jonathan Franzen, *Freedom*, 2010) • *Dept of Extreme Etiquette.* 'But one does not scream with a beer barrel tap inserted deep into one's jugular vein…' (Jack Oleck, *The Vault of Horror*, 1973)

R.I.P.

Paul Bacon (1923–2015), US graphic artist whose more than 6500 book covers include over 100 for sf novels, died on 8 June; he was 91.

Marcia Brown (1918–2015), US Caldecott Medal-winning children's author and illustrator whose picture books often retold fairy tales as in *Cinderella* (1954), died on 28 April aged 96.

Moyra Caldecott (Olivia Brown Caldecott, 1927–2015), South-

African-born UK author of many children's and YA fantasies – the best known being the sequence beginning with and named for *The Tall Stones* (1977) – died on 23 May; she was 87.

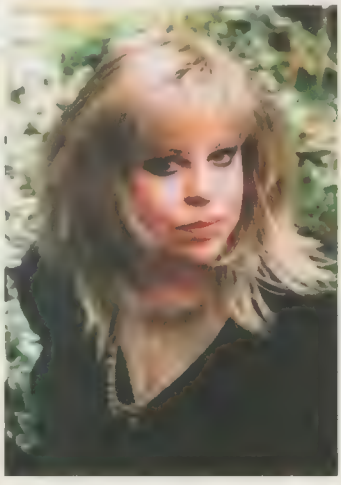
Yvonne 'Vonnie' Carts-Powell (1966–2015), US fan, reviewer and science writer whose *The Science of Heroes* (2008) examined the TV series *Heroes*, died on 22 May.

Joël Champetier (1957–2015), French-Canadian author and editor (with *Solaris* magazine) whose first adult sf novel was *La taupe et le dragon* (1991; trans 1999 as *The Dragon's Eye*), died on 30 May aged 57.

Chris Gilmore (1947–2013), *Interzone* reviewer in the David Pringle era, freelance copy editor who worked on *Spectrum SF*, and author of a few short stories, died on 6 May 2013 aged 66.

Wolfgang Jeschke (1936–2015), Czech-born German sf author, fan, editor and publisher (the long-time sf specialist at Heyne) whose first novel was *Der letzte Tag der Schöpfung* (1981; trans as *The Last Day of Creation* 1982), died on 10 June; he was 78.

Sir Christopher Lee (1922–2015), UK actor most famed for his many Hammer Films portrayals of Dracula and perhaps most loved as the Laird in *The Wicker Man* (1973) – with further memorable appearances in the Fu-Manchu, James Bond, *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars* and *Hobbit* franchises – died on 7 June aged 93. Early monstrous roles for Hammer included *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957) and *The Mummy* (1959). His autobiography is *Tall, Dark and Gruesome* (1977; exp 1997). He was knighted in 2009.



Tanith Lee (1947–2015), distinguished and prolific UK author of more than 100 fantasy, children's fantasy, horror and sf novels and collections since 1971, died on 24 May; she was 67. Her honours include the British Fantasy Award for *Death's Master* (1979), and three life-achievement accolades: World Horror (2009), World Fantasy (2013) and Bram Stoker (2015). Her talent was amazingly diverse. Many heartfelt tributes have appeared.

Graham Lord (1943–2015), Rhodesia-born UK author whose sf ventures were *God and All His Angels* (1976) and *A Party to Die For* (1997), died on 13 June aged 72.

Patrick Macnee (1922–2015), UK actor forever identified with *The Avengers* at its 1961–1969 classical best – which included many weird and science-fictional tropes – died on 25 June aged 93.

Chuck Miller (1952–2015), US publisher, editor and author best known for the small press Underwood-Miller Inc (1976–1994 with Tim Underwood) which published Jack Vance and the collected stories of Philip K. Dick, died on 24 May aged 62. He also co-edited U-M's critical anthologies about Stephen King.

Earl Norem (1924–2015), US artist who painted for *Masters of the Universe* and other pop-culture franchises, died on 19 June; though 91 he was still working, on a *Mars Attacks* trading card project.

Charles W. Runyon (1928–2015), US author of thrillers and some sf – including *Pig World* (1971) and three other novels – died on 8 June; he was 87.

Doris Elaine Sauter, friend of Philip K. Dick who co-edited *What If Our World Is Their Heaven? The Final Conversations of Philip K. Dick* (2000), died on 25 May aged 63. Her memoir of Dick remains unpublished.

Jannick Storm (Finn Jannick Storm Jørgensen, 1939–2015), Danish author, critic, editor and translator (of Ballard, Dick and others) who did much to establish the sf genre in Denmark, died on 9 May aged 76. Three collections of his stories appeared; his 1970s sf novel *Hjerter er trumf* [*Hearts are Trumps*], though unpublished until 1995, became a major 1976 film.

COLD TURKEY

CAROLE JOHNSTONE

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E. CATHERINE TOBLER

SILENCER

GLASSER IS THE HOLE IN MY HEAD, Glasser is the hole in my heart, and Glasser is the strange stillness that settles on my shoulders and overcomes my hands. My hands should shake, they should sweat; they should not be able to bear the weight of this weapon, but they do. Without complaint.

ILLUSTRATED BY BEN BALDWIN

The reflected whole of my fragmented self hunches like a beetle in the round of Glasser's eye, tiny in the black expanse of his pupil and I—

And we—

He wants me to tell him this is the last time; he's so young and wants reassurance, and I, I say nothing. His fear steadies my hands.

At first glance, every building looks the same. Long hallways of clean, cold linoleum tongue between rows of metal lockers. Double doors open onto more hallways, singular doors onto windowed classrooms. Sometimes there is soft, gray carpet. Sometimes bins with names crayoned onto construction paper replace lockers.

The buildings never mattered in the beginning, even if some provide better angles, more advantages, better places to hide. We move in tandem up concrete steps, through doorways, down clean hallways. I savor the smells in the air: the chemistry lab is burning salt, fresh typewriter ribbons have been cracked open in the office, and someone has made popcorn. Farther out, the thunder of tubas from band practice. The flutes come in as we push through the library doors, as we see ourselves crawling behind the main desk. It's no place to hide – but Glasser is the hole, the hole in my head and I—

Countless iterations. We crouch in a tile-lined hallway, checking vests for supplies. Our hands know the routine perfectly, every pocket committed to memory. Given our injuries, we should not have memories, but we defy medicine in more than one way. We should not be able to travel through time and space, but we move as effortlessly as birds through air.

Our hands know: this bulge belongs there, that square here. Cool cylinder, hard box, cold crescent of trigger. Rubber grip against hip and lower back the way a lover's hand might have one day done. Our hands no longer sweat. Early days, we had so much to learn, like we were in school ourselves and lesson one quickly became the knowledge that a person couldn't do anything well with a slick grip. Gloves only help so much; we don't like even that slight distance between our hands and the feel of metal, of rubber. We like the way the handguard feels under fingers unencumbered, the way the stock fits cool against our cheeks.

We took the vests from a school in Denver, when Glasser believed theft would be the worst of our actions. We pulled the guns from battered lockers in Vancouver, bypassing stashes of marijuana because getting high had lost all appeal. We scored the bulk of our present ammunition from a hole tunneled beneath a linoleum floor in a school in Philly, bullets still chilled by winter cold. We had petrol bombs once, from what we thought was Mexico.

Stealing doesn't matter, I tell Glasser with the authority of one who would oversee senior ditch day (had already overseen senior ditch day?). It matters to him – being good despite everything – but in the end, we won't think about stolen vests, no matter that we know their geography flawlessly. Glasser's hand slides to the front pocket where he keeps unboxed cartridges. Thumb and index finger pull one free the way he might a cigarette. He doesn't place it between his dry lips; he loads it like he's loaded it innumerable times and by now, this is true.

There is no band here, no chem lab. This school is filled with song, washing over us as we push into the music room. It's a round; high, young voices gently row a boat down a stream. It is a boat that will never arrive.

The first time the school is anything other than a modern building, we stand in confusion. What changed, Glasser whispers. His fingers curl into a fist; he wants to hold my arm, but I told him long ago not to touch me. I couldn't bear it, because he— Because the blood running down my head, into every line of his palms—

Is this it? he asks, and I have no answer for him, even as I suspect it's not. This is not the end, so much as another terrible beginning in a string of terrible beginnings. This beginning in a far distant place ties to a fragmented thought in my fragmented head. If we start here and now, it may shorten our— War? Casualties? I don't know what I mean because I can't stop staring at the teacher's long skirts; how they brush over the rough-hewn floor and the way bright eyes peer at us above small fistfuls of the wrinkled wool.

Linoleum is best; it's clean and cold, it's seamless and reminds me of dry erase boards with brief splashes of color easily removed. This rough floor soaks up all trace of our passage, as hun-

gry for the spill as we are. It doesn't matter that it's not linoleum; it won't ever. The procedure remains the same: determine the best approach and go. When immediately faced with a target, we don't give them time to talk. We can't. They will try to talk us down, they will try to understand our plight, even while they never can. A hand will lift, like they are calming spooked livestock. We are not spooked livestock. We are screaming and we will spill their blood, but we are not spooked livestock.

Standing outside this infinite hell, someone might view it as a game – we have targets and every time we bring the chaos, we level up. The known world falls away – the world and this not-game resets – while Glasser and I fragment through blackness. One shutter closes so another can iris open.

We find ourselves in a new school, a different year. It's a school of younger students, the walls boasting calendars where every day is a construction paper apple with an inked number upon it. The year never matters, not until we began to piece it together and decide we might have the ability to stop it – are we arriving before or after our last incursion? Does one weigh upon the others at all? Maybe we can't stop our travelling – maybe we are always and forever stuck on this bone-deep track. We did this to ourselves, didn't we; we were the hand and the eye, we were the finger stroking the cold crescent of the trigger. But the phenomenon as a whole – the shootings? Maybe we could stop it, because—

I can't bear his hands on me, and Glasser knows, but still he gathers me close with a shuddering, whispered apology, unable to do anything else, surprisingly steady fingers threading through my blood-sodden hair and we—

Iris open.

The distant future is vastly different from anything we know. I think maybe we have finally died, that whatever loop we are caught in has vomited us into the afterlife, but Glasser crumples to his knees and spits on the metal-slick floor. It's impossible, he says, but what does the word mean? How do we quantify impossibility given what we see, what we do?

Within the school, there are hallways, but they are narrow and lack lockers, more like access corridors than places people would congregate or stroll. There are classrooms, but little else. No labs and no library. No cafeteria. In each cavernous classroom, students hang suspended within ovoid, pod-like desks. Each wholly encases the student, concave interior scrolling with problems as convex exterior cascades with answers.

We walk among them for the first time in silent awe. We never let ourselves get close before – we have been in their place, we have suffered—

Glasser's hands tangled in my bloody hair

The reflection of my broken body in his endless eye

And we say *never again*, but between us, never is always. We cannot escape the moment, because—

These students look like any other – fleshy and pimpled and hair done up in the latest fashions dictated by press and peer, but inside their shells, they appear unreachable. We touch the surfaces of the shells – impossibly cold – and see the tracks built into the floors, tracks to guide the shells into the world, carrying them safely home. If they see us, they do not react – so we make them see us.

We lift gun and grenade and make them see us. This world shatters as any other world does, as our own had. Concave interiors run with blood, convex exteriors run with unanswered questions. Unsolved problems. Guards flock to the classroom, but the space is vast and we are small and clever. We have already wrought what we would. The guards are easier targets and possess guns like none we have been before. We take the guns from their limp hands. We move on.

Air sheets from us in cold waves as we iris into another time, another place, but Glasser's anger burns hot like fresh sugar-syrup. It blisters the air, bubbling the orange and blue paint off the lockers. He says he's done – the blood staining us is unseen, but not unfelt – it eats into our bones, soaking our marrow – and Glasser wants nothing more to do with it. He slams the butt of his gun into a locker door and the foot-shaped wedge in the metal vomits more paint to the floor. Glasser slides opposite of me, knees bent to his chest, breathing hard.

I am small within the circle of his eye. I no longer see the ruin guns have made of his face; it's

gone, it was never there, there is only the eye, glossy bloodshot round holding me the way his hands want to. My legs are drawn close, arms wrapped around. Gun is still held loose in my hand, because I never let it go. I never let it go.

I don't tell him we can't choose to not go. We tried before, in the early days upon the discovery we were not dead (we got hungry – do the dead hunger? Do the dead crave the sweet bubble of cola against lips?) but were only someplace else. Thrown into a school we did not know, with teachers and students unfamiliar. They could see us, but didn't give us a second thought, and we—

We tried to go home – should have been able to walk, to run, to catch a bus. We tried to get out. There was only one way out of every building.

I lift my gun, watching Glasser across its shiny barrel. He already knows and I already know, and he slams his head back into the locker. We are not spooked livestock and we are not what anyone would ever think we are. We are trapped, as are they all, in an endless and bloody loop, and there are no what ifs, not until Glasser starts spewing them from his cracked lips like he's discovered the cat can be both dead and alive and also always always *always* bleeding to death in the same goddamn instant.

I never say don't.

I never say stop.

It's hard not to hope, even in this place. Even as we push from the linoleum and head to the classrooms. And watching Glasser, and the rage setting his jaw, I think, maybe we *can* stop – maybe there is a way out, if only we make it bad enough.

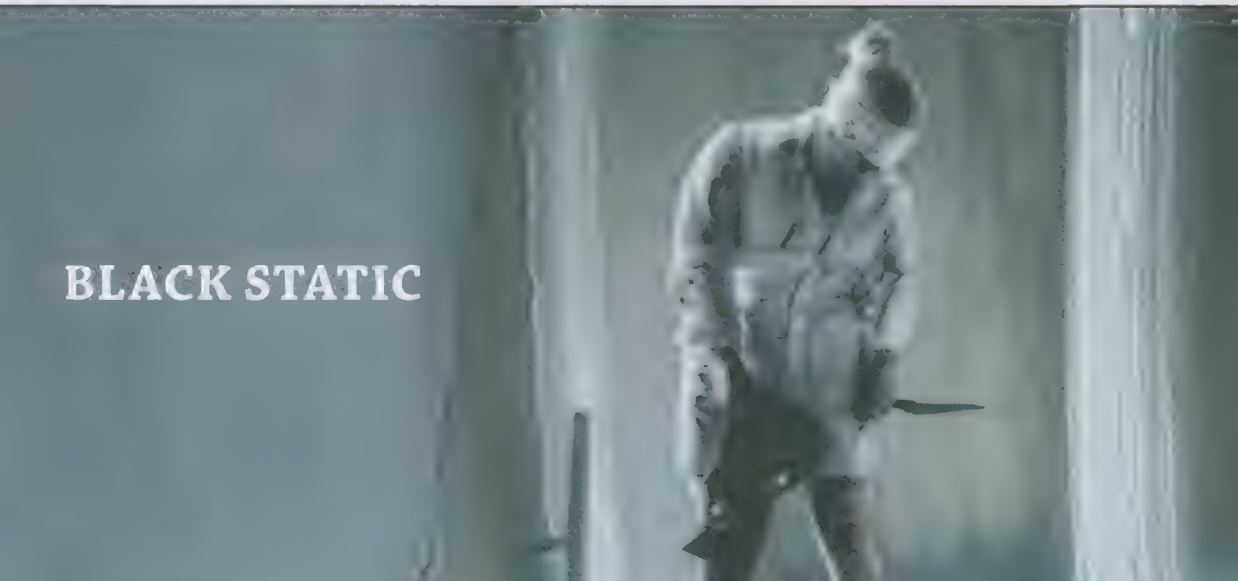
What's bad enough?

Is it bad enough when I find myself splayed on the rust colored carpet, warm blood flooding around me as the world shutters to black? The librarian leans over me and she speaks, but I can't hear a word. I read her lips – she says my name, over and over until it's the only thing. And then, she is as I am – her skull comes apart, droplets of blood like hot rain against my cheeks. She falls heavy against me, a blanket, a shield.

Is it bad enough when Glasser tries to put the pieces of us back together with his shaking hands – when he kneels over me and cradles my head and whispers *sorry sorry sorry* and I know why, his palms running with blood – but we have to be here, so we can go, so we can— Glasser's face is still whole, high cheekbone and dark brow, crooked piercing we made when he was twelve and I was fifteen and I want to stop this moment before—

A third bullet rips Glasser down into the same dark and I cannot lift my hands to piece him back together.

Is it bad enough when we wake in a new school? Bloodless, confused, on the edge of an inexplicable delirium. We are never whole, but there is no blood, only a dull ache where we have been wounded. Eternally bruised skin and the lump of muscle intimately describing a bullet's



passage. A tender reminder whenever we press, a bullet humming with heat inside a brain.

Another place, another school – as if we are being drawn.

We walk into another distant future, a future where there are no such buildings. No schools, only pod-like apartments, students contained in smaller and smaller rooms. The brush of one hand against another is forbidden because if anyone feels anything – if one knows and loves the warmth of another, it becomes a thing to be lost. Cherished, precious, defensible. Here, there is no touch, no feeling, and we don't breathe because it spooks the livestock. Each emotion leads to darknesses that have no end.

It didn't stop. Wouldn't stop. Couldn't stop. And we picked up arms in an effort to *make* it stop.

Is it bad enough, Glasser crouched beside me, soaked with blood and shaking as he reloads? Warm, blood-slick fingers on a metal magazine, but he knew how to manage well enough then. He never should have, those long fingers meant for better things than bullets and crescent triggers. He played piano once, Beethoven, Chopin, Amos. But this is the fate assigned us.

Is it bad enough when Glasser looks at me and whispers *how many more shootings? How many more will it take?*

And is it bad enough—

when we find ourselves inside a school we know too well, armed to the teeth, stalking familiar corridors and well-known rooms until we kill them all—

Every single one of them, and Glasser, and me, and *all* of them—

Is it bad enough when—

Glasser cannot piece together the skull he shattered but he holds me and he tries

bloody hair streaming through his fingers, down his palms

and when his hands steady, I see myself reflected within his singular eye and know we have to take the bullet so we can take the ride. My hands should shake, they should sweat and they should not be able to bear the weight of this, but they do – without complaint – and he wants me to tell him it's the last time.

The flutes come in and the distant thunder of tubas.

Is it bad enough I can't tell him it's the last?

Is it bad enough I can only whisper *just one more…just one more* and we vanish into a new school?

Just one more.

Just one.

E. Catherine Tobler lives in Colorado, a state that is no stranger to gun violence. She's sincerely tired of it. She is the senior editor at *Shimmer Magazine*, and her fiction has been a finalist for the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award. Visit www.ecatherine.com for more. Her most recent story for *Interzone* was 'Oublierette' in issue #255, and she's also appeared in our sister magazine *Black Static*.

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Printed in black & static and published bimonthly by the makers of Interzone: ttapress.com/blackstatic/

SEBASTIÁN

THE SIX OF US BATTLED AGAINST THE BLIZZARD AS WE PUSHED onwards down the hill, every step a struggle. In the hollow at the centre of the field we cleared away the snow, which had already started to settle, and located the hatch. The mechanism standing proud of the hinged metal access plate turned surprisingly easily, which made me think it had been used recently. So perhaps my suspicions were true.

ILLUSTRATED BY MARTIN HANFORD

I said to Matu, "Sir, the snow could easily trap us down there."

Matu was a broad shouldered man, disciplined and gracious. His dark hair was speckled with the snow. He dismissed my concern with a brusque wave of his hand. "I've arranged for men to come at this time tomorrow. If needed they will clear away the snow for us, and free the hatch again."

"You think of everything," I said.

The men all smiled broadly. Our spores conveyed the strength of purpose we felt collectively. We were strong together, always. Matu pressed his hand to my arm and nodded. "I try."

I went first, climbing down the ladder into the darkness. Jorge handed me a burning torch before I moved away from the opening. Holding it and climbing down at the same time was tricky, but I managed. My foot settled on firm and dry earth at the base. I held the torch high, above and behind me, but I saw nothing in the immediate area.

Meanwhile the men lowered our boxes on ropes, and then came down to join me.

"The supplies should be safe here," Matu said. "For now we'll travel light and have an initial look around. If anyone *has* been down here, hopefully it will be obvious."

"Yes sir," Ruben said, always eager to please.

Six of the Winter Guard's finest, we were supremely confident we could deal with anything we might find in the depths of the old city. We had no shred of doubt or hesitation.

The broken and wrecked buildings of the abandoned streets came into view. They glimmered grey and cold in the meagre firelight of our torches. Some had storefront windows unbroken, etched with names and advertising. Had I been here hundreds of years earlier, perhaps I would have gone inside, for drinks and lunch, bathed in midday sunlight.

Matu was at my side. "What do you think, Sebastián? There can't be anything down here."

"Nothing alive," I said.

Jorge breezed past us, his bright blue eyes catching the firelight for a moment. "Agustín will bring a little life to the place." He cast a glance over his shoulder. "Won't you, my friend?"

Agustín shrugged. "Best I don't leave the task to you."

Above us on the surface, no doubt the blizzard still raged. Here it was quiet and unnaturally still, the air stale from lack of movement, the dust thick and settled beneath our feet.

We had on many layers of clothing and thick coats to protect against the cold, though if anything it was less severe down here. And at least there was no wind, which on the exposed surface could cut through you with the casual precision of a rapier.

My torch passed a fragment of a sign. SLOW ROASTED CHICKEN, it declared, and at a price that could scarcely be believed. My wife and children could eat like royalty at these prices.

"Let's move on," Matu said. "There's nothing here."

Nothing but ghosts and forgotten dreams. And good riddance to them. I wished I could go back to the surface. My thoughts flickered back to the night before, to the pallor of the house, the tension burning just beneath the surface.

I had checked on the children and found them asleep. At their window I pulled back the curtain, but low cloud shrouded the moon and cast the street into darkness. Somewhere a hoarding creaked on its hinges as the wind lifted it.

Inés had pushed away from me when I'd tried to wrap my arms around her. Her spores had burned like an angry crackling fire, her eyes dark like ash. She thought I was not a good husband. She said, "What have you done, Sebastián?"

When she sat down at her bureau I put my hands on her shoulders, hoping to sway her with the strength of my own certainty. A fiery burst of spores from her had told me she'd no intention of relenting even a little.

"It will be fine," I'd said. "The stories of the old city are just superstition. How could there be any truth in them?"

"Is it so terrible for there to be stories and superstitions in the world? Does the Duke demand that we fear only him?"

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that," I'd had to say. She would never have dared to say anything like it in public. Or even think it.

Still her spores had crackled like a spitting fire, and there had been no hint of her relenting. The women of Winter are full of fire. Sometimes I wished it could be otherwise, but it's how they

are. She'd risen from the bureau and turned to me. "What if you don't come back?"

I pressed my forehead to hers. "I will come back. I always do."

I hoped and expected to keep that promise to her.

Back in the present, in the dark of the old city, Matu said, "Are you all right, Sebastián?"

"Of course," I said. I moved into the centre of the group, letting their spores surround me. Imbued with their strength of purpose my attention returned to the task at hand.

A long-abandoned street flickered around us in the torchlight. A streetlamp towered uselessly above, its lamp long since broken and untended. Our torches were already guttering and fading. We'd chosen them because this place might have been swarming with vermin, but now we switched to lanterns. They would last longer and cast a better light for seeing. The six of us held our lanterns high and moved onwards into the gloom.

ALUNA

The towers of Ahkraan stretched below me, glistening in the sunlight. It was the day of the review. I was young and I felt powerful, surrounded by infinite possibilities. I could see them like a sea of light and life, structure and chaos.

The Perigee transport swooped down to the Alpha Tower, and I stepped out onto the landing platform. My aide went with me, loping at my side.

"Do we have everything?" I asked, repeating myself for about the tenth time.

"Yes, Aluna. We have everything you need for the presentation."

I reached out and patted its haunch. "Then let's get this done."

The door bloomed and we went inside. Light sparkled all around, channelled in exotic patterns. My visor tech filtered it into a pleasing ambience.

Professor Paschendal met us at the entrance to the auditorium. "Thank you for coming, Doctor," she said.

"Please, call me Aluna."

"Very well. You're all prepared?"

"I am."

"Can I offer you refreshments?"

"Just a glass of water, please."

She led us to a side room and indicated a small table where we could sit. My aide put itself into rest mode nearby. A glass of water materialised without any further request. Our conversation was being monitored, of course.

"May I ask what you hope to achieve today?"

I regarded the professor, trying to gauge whether she would support me or vote against. Or if she had yet to decide. "You may ask, of course, but I think I would like to make my presentation, and then we will see where that leads us."

"Very well," she said. "The selected peers are convening as we speak. Not long to wait now."

"I am very excited to have this opportunity," I said, honestly.

Her smile was slight; she was distracted, I thought. "You intrigue us," she said.

Well, that was a start, but I knew full well that intrigue might not necessarily lead to support.

SEBASTIÁN

The old city had been prone to flooding. When so much of it was destroyed by the storm of '67, the Winter Council had taken the audacious decision to construct a new surface above the level of the old city, and then build an entirely new city above. For decades afterwards the older subterranean city remained a home to Winter's poorest. A criminal element rose up in the squalor. Eventually trespass here was outlawed.

We came out into an open area, which might once have been the city square.

"What's that?" Leandro said.

I saw a shape on the floor directly ahead. Like a bundle of rags discarded in a heap. But as I went closer I saw it was not empty rags. I moved around the crumpled body and crouched down for a closer look.

It was a woman wearing a hooded robe of some kind. She lay on her right side, her legs bent at the knees, as if she had been kneeling and then simply toppled over. Her hands were held

together, one cupped against the other. The skin of her face and hands had not yet decayed. This was no skeleton from long ago.

Matu added his lantern light to mine so we could see more clearly. "Why is she here?" he said. "It makes no sense."

I glanced at his troubled face, all crimson and shadow. "She must have come for a reason. Unless she was brought here."

"Is there any identification?"

"I pulled loose a cord around her waist and lifted the heavy robe aside. Underneath she wore another coat. She had dressed for the world above, I thought, the modern city. I felt inside the inner pocket of her coat and pulled out her identification papers, all intact.

"Alejandra Sosa," I said. "She's one of the people reported missing."

"You're sure?" Matu asked. He did not have my infallible memory, and had not studied the files in the detail I had.

I nodded. "I'm certain."

Matu stood up. "We'll have to keep searching. Perhaps there are others down here."

Aside from Matu, Leandro and myself, we had brought Agustín, Ruben and Jorge with us, who were all fine hunters and trackers. We wanted to search a wide area as swiftly as possible, so we split into three pairs and separated. We had no fear of being unable to find each other again later. Leandro stayed with me. The other four stepped away from us, their lights drifting into darkness to our left and right.

Leandro was young and strong and knew more about the history of Winter than anyone else I had ever met. His parents had been historians and he had studied too. He'd jumped at the chance to come down to the old city, which was normally forbidden. His enthusiasm for being here was unmistakeable in his spores, despite the body we'd found.

There was rubble strewn everywhere. He crouched down and pulled at something, which turned out to be an old bicycle wheel lying buried under the debris. "This is all incredible!" he said.

Perhaps so, but we had a job to do. "Let's keep going."

The road ahead was wide and open so it was easy to press onwards, though it was difficult to see far into the darkness ahead or above.

A little later, Leandro bent down, his lantern pushing back the shadows. "This ground isn't untouched," he said. "Something comes and goes through here."

"Animals of some kind?"

He tilted his head left and right, weighing the theory for size. "No, a person, but with barely any weight at all."

The street to the left sloped downward, at a steep angle of descent. It looked clean while the right-hand street had a great deal of rubble, with the walls of buildings collapsed all around and covered everywhere in spider webs.

He indicated his lantern. "The flame is steady. The wind, the storm above, it doesn't penetrate here."

I felt strangely uneasy, as if something large and dangerous lay just beyond what we could see. I glanced at my watch. "Come on," I said. "We should go back to the others now."

ALUNA

The auditorium was filled with applause as I walked out to the centre of the room. My aide accessed the projection system and my first data image appeared in the air.

"The multiverse," I began, "is infinite. Anything we can imagine exists somewhere in alternate reality, space and time. Yet the intersection between other realities and our own is limited. If we were to search for a particular specific variation on our own reality, it might take forever to find it.

"Thus the idea of engineered reality is largely regarded as an implausible, unachievable goal. While we might intersect with and discover any number of other realities, we do not get to choose. While we might step through doorways to other worlds, we cannot dictate what we will find there when we do.

"Of course we can engineer our own reality, but this requires consensus for change. And how would this occur without proof of the consequences of that change? Why would anyone vote for a change that might not be for the better?"

A voice rose from the audience. "Are you say-

ing we have become stagnant, unable to change?"

"Unwilling, perhaps, rather than unable. Because surely we are able to do most things. And indeed why should we change when we have already transformed Rai into paradise?"

"Then I fail to see your point."

"My point is that other realities might be preferable, but our people will require evidence to support any such hypothesis. They will require us to carry out experiments to prove the case."

"But you have already acknowledged that engineering other realities is impossible."

"I said it was regarded as unachievable. Please allow me to continue with my presentation."

The images that filled the air now were of some of our craftsmanship and artworks. A quilt whose mathematical precision of design and manufacture was without flaw. A crystalline sculpture perfect in every facet. A holographic glade whose every blade of grass glistened in the sunlight of a perfect summer afternoon.

"It is safe to say that as a society we value perfection. We achieve it in everything we do. We expect it in every aspect of Rai, the world we have made. The beautiful towers of Ahkraan, the fabulous cities, fields and oceans of our world.

"It is no wonder, then, that in seeking a reality to carry out an experiment in otherness, we seek the perfect reality for it, but that is not necessarily what we always need. It is my contention that sometimes an approximation will do. It might take an eternity to find a doorway to a very specific reality that must meet billions of predetermined criteria, but nevertheless we might quickly find a reality that meets only a few basic requirements."

My presentation faded at some command that had not come from me. Professor Paschendal stepped forward from the crowd. "What value would there be in an experiment whose criteria were only vaguely defined? The result, however interesting, would not necessarily translate back to Rai."

"Perhaps not," I conceded, "but it would provide data, and the basis for further discussion."

She granted me the smallest nod of her head. "We will consider what you have said. I suggest you propose a specific experiment. If you can find a doorway to a reality you consider viable for it, we will vote on whether or not you may proceed."

"Thank you," I said, and I confess I felt triumphant, in that moment.

SEBASTIÁN

Jorge and Ruben did not return to the rendezvous point at the agreed time. Matu led the rest of us in search of them.

"Should our priority be to get reinforcements?" Agustín asked. "Perhaps the storm above is not as bad as predicted, and we can make our way back out?"

"And leave Ruben and Jorge alone down here?" Matu said. "No. We find them."

Leandro had gone off in the same direction they had, eager to track them. He called out, "This way."

The four of us set off into the darkness. The streets in this direction were cobblestone, and our boots clattered loudly as we made our way.

Amongst the rubble I saw a length of guttering collapsed and lying at an angle against a nearby wall. This place had not seen rainwater for hundreds of summers. I wondered if the deepwater wells could still draw up anything drinkable from deep below our feet. I shuddered at the idea and reached for my water bottle for a gulp of water I knew to be clean.

Leandro had followed the trail perhaps half a mile, into the Flores section of the old town, but now he said, "I'm not sure where they went from here."

Distantly I felt something shifting inside me, and I had the impression of a vastness in the dark. Something moving. Its spores were like the bow wave of a boat, or the tidal pull of the Moon.

"Do you feel that?" I asked the others.

If they replied I didn't notice. I pushed back the hood of my coat, despite the fierce cold, and tried to lift my lantern higher, to cast a little more light ahead. I felt myself pulled in a direction to the right. A sense of dread and disgust washed through me, as if I had been both submerged in cold water and set on fire all at the same time.

When we found the trail again, it led us in the direction of this horror we could feel. We kept

moving, but the confidence we'd had as a team was beginning to drain away.

ALUNA

I was walking through the art precinct in the centre of Ahkraan with my brother Kamen a few days after my presentation. I believe I noticed a slight crackle of static in the air moments before it happened, and I faltered slightly. That hesitation saved me. Kamen was a step ahead and the reality gateway appeared around him.

Beyond him I glimpsed a verdant jungle. A curious vividly blue bird fluttered against the gateway but was held back on the other side.

Kamen turned towards me, but his right arm and shoulder were trapped in the gateway. His face twisted in agony, then a calm fell upon him.

I clutched his free hand. His mouth moved soundlessly. What did he try to say? I couldn't tell. Was he afraid? Did he even know what was happening? Was there something he wanted to say to me?

A large shape moved out of the jungle. The massive jaws of the creature closed around Kamen's arm and tugged. In the blink of an eye my brother was hauled through to the other side and dragged away into the jungle. And then the gateway snapped shut.

The event was traced to a miscalculation in the Rotal facility. The gateway was reopened to the same coordinates and a team sent through to retrieve my brother's body. We cloned a new version of him, but of course he was not strictly the same person and had no memory of the events of that day.

Those last moments with my real brother, failing to understand what he wanted to say to me, used to haunt my dreams. I believe they were a catalyst for much of my research from that point onwards.

SEBASTIÁN

As our lanterns brought light into the street ahead I saw someone dressed in a white tunic or uniform, standing over another crouched figure. The one standing lifted its face and looked directly at us. It had the delicate features of a woman, long white hair, and appeared to be very pale. She turned around and stepped away. We rushed forward but by the time we reached the spot where she'd been standing there was no sign of her.

The crouched figure was Ruben. He seemed barely aware of us, was shivering and gibbering, unable to form coherent words. His spores told us he had been completely terrified by something, and was still afraid now, even of us.

"Ruben," I tried to say gently, "it's Sebastián, you're safe, we have you, calm yourself." But he was unable to.

We stepped away from him and talked quietly to each other.

"We must take him out of here," Agustín said.

"We don't know if we can," Matu reminded us. "The blizzard…and would you abandon Jorge?"

I could still feel a powerful presence out there in the darkness, although pulling further away with every passing moment. I didn't know whether to chase after it or run screaming in the other direction. Was that the choice Ruben had faced, too?

"You all feel that, don't you?"

"Oh yes," Leandro said, "but what is it? Could it have been that woman we saw?"

Could anyone have spores so powerful? If so it was far beyond anything I had experienced before, but if not her then what? Something immense.

Leandro inspected the ground where we'd seen the woman standing over Ruben. "These are the same light footprints we saw earlier, Sebastián. Barely making any impression in the dirt."

"Leandro, Agustín," Matu said. "You're with me. We'll scout the immediate area for any sign of Jorge. We stay together. We do not lose sight of each other, even for a second. Sebastián, stay here with Ruben. See if you can get him to talk."

I nodded. "Yes sir. Help me to pull him over beside the wall so we have a little cover."

Ruben did not resist us and we moved him without difficulty. I knelt down and took his hand in mine, but he seemed unaware of me. His head moved erratically from side to side, as if he were lost in a nightmare.

The Guardsmen moved away into the dark,

their lanterns growing smaller and dimmer in the distance.

ALUNA

I submitted my proposal to the review board and was summoned to reappear before them. I did not immediately detect the hostility in the room, which is ironic, I suppose. I began earnestly.

"The basis for my experiment is the notion that the interactions between us, and our understanding of each other, are severely limited in nature – if we are limited to verbal communication and, even less precisely, nonverbal communication. My hypothesis is that a more successful and truthful exchange might be engineered."

"Your so-called *spores* mechanism?"

"Yes. A means by which individuals would communicate their feelings more explicitly, more truthfully. This would, I think, lead to a radically altered development of a society. The precise nature of the altered society over time is difficult to predict, however."

"Why would we ever consider such a change?"

"I feel certain we never would, unless there was evidence to support a positive outcome for us. And the only way to obtain such data would be to carry out the experiment."

"By which you mean to experiment on another reality?" Again I was slow to detect the disdain in her voice.

"Yes. The ideal test ground for such an experiment would be a pre-industrial culture, or one just on the cusp of industrialisation. Would technology even develop at all in a society where communication was more effective, or might that society have other values entirely? Might they, for example, develop a new art form based on skilfulness in communication?"

A murmur of unhappiness went around the auditorium, which now I could not help but notice.

"You seriously expect us to support…this?" Paschendal said.

"Why wouldn't you?"

"Were a society to develop naturally along these lines, that would be one thing—"

I interrupted her. "As I thought I had established in my earlier presentation, it would likely take an eternity of searching through alternate realities to find one that had already developed along the lines I propose. And even then, we would have missed out on all the data relating to the initial development of that culture. It will be far more effective to engineer the change and be in a position to monitor the impact from the beginning.

"Moreover, if our only requirement is to locate a reachable pre-industrial society with an indigenous species that otherwise resembles our own physiology, then that is easily achieved. In fact we have already mapped coordinates for many such worlds."

Paschendal raised a hand to silence me. "To intervene in the development of any reality in such an extreme manner is unthinkable, whatever the hypothetical benefits for *us* might be. Do they not have the right to live their lives without our interference?"

I stared at her, utterly perplexed. "Do you not understand? The reality I require already exists somewhere. All I am proposing is a shortcut to finding it."

"That is not what you are proposing at all," Paschendal said. "By that token you could commit any atrocity you like, on the grounds that it's already happening somewhere."

"But—"

"No. We will not hear of it. You will cease all work in this area at once. I suggest you find an entirely different field of study. Might I recommend something in the realm of philosophy and ethics? Your understanding of these topics is woefully inadequate at present."

While I stood there dumbfounded, everyone turned away and walked out of the auditorium. Finally Paschendal let go of the icy stare with which she regarded me, and she too walked away.

SEBASTIÁN

I managed to wedge my lantern in amongst some bricks so I didn't have to keep holding it, and sat with Ruben under its feeble glow.

Only a day before, though it seemed an age ago now, I had been called to the Winter Duke's office to discuss our missing people. I stood for-

mally before him and delivered my report, such as it was. He was standing by the window, staring out into the white-covered fields beyond.

"I just don't know how these people can have vanished, Your Grace."

"I did not summon you here so you could tell me what you *don't* know, Sebastián."

The Duke's spores were so powerful, crushing me as if beneath his boot, I'd felt compelled to agree that indeed he did not, and my lack of progress was entirely unsatisfactory.

"They did not cross the borders, Your Grace. We are sure of that."

"Then they are still in the city, somewhere."

It was then I'd first considered the notion they might have been taken below. Or gone there of their own volition. "Your Grace, might we consider a search of the old city?"

I recoiled from the burst of disgust in the Duke's spores. "That foul place? Why would anyone go there?"

"It was once a place of lawlessness," I said. "Perhaps the missing could have been taken there against their will."

"It is said that those who go there either do not come back alive, or come back as raving madmen. Superstitious nonsense, of course."

"Undoubtedly, Your Grace. I have no fear of that place."

"Perhaps you should go, then. If only to rule it out. And when you come back unscathed it will serve also to dispel these ridiculous fears about the place."

"They are ridiculous, I have no doubt," I said. "But surely if it keeps the people from going down there, it is all to the good. The old city can't be safe after being left unmaintained for hundreds of years. And it would be a great drain on our resources if we were required to police it."

He came away from the window and gave me his undivided attention then. "The fact that it is unlawful to go down there should be all the people need to know."

"Of course, Your Grace."

"If they need something to fear, they should fear me."

And I did fear him, in that moment, under his intense scrutiny. There was no reason to believe anyone had gone to the old city. And yet, fifty or more people had gone missing in the last few weeks, with no trace of them to be found. Where else could they be?"

"So, I will arrange the search, Your Grace? To rule it out…"

He had nodded, looking solemn. "Go as a squad of six men. Tell Matu to lead the team. He can handpick whomever he thinks suitable. I am told there is a blizzard coming. You might want to take yourself underground before it hits. Or else the entrance could be snowed in for days till the storm passes."

It was late in the day and we would need to prepare. "We will go at first light in the morning," I told him.

"Very well."

He turned away from me, going back to the window to gaze out upon the fields, which were already dusted with snow.

And in the morning we had come down here, recklessly with no certainty of being able to escape until the entrance hatch was cleared for us. And now my friend Ruben was lost to madness, and there was nothing ridiculous about any of it.

"You'll be all right, Ruben," I said.

The men had gone to the east, but for the last half an hour or so I had sensed a presence again, further to the north. So powerful, restless and angry. The other Guardsmen must feel it too.

It was coming closer, I had no doubt. And I thought Ruben knew it too. Occasionally he cast fearful glances in that direction, mumbling all the while but making no sense.

"That woman who stood before you," I said. "Who was she? Ruben! Answer me!"

But he would not. Or could not.

ALUNA

I continued my work in secret and engineered the virus, keeping it contained within fourteen layers of safeguard. Physical barriers, force protections, hyper-dimensional firewalls and more. With an incineration mechanism to destroy the virus if any of the other safeguards were to fail.

It was quite beautiful, in its own way. It held the latent energy and wherewithal to infiltrate the target DNA, rewriting it to resonate on inter-

dimensional frequencies, connecting organic matter at the subatomic level with threads of transient matter.

The result would be a kind of instinctive telepathy, or at the least a degree of empathy previously unseen. The fact that my peers had forbidden me from releasing it upon a suitable test reality was infuriating, and only served to prove they did not understand me, or the value of my work. Perhaps it was this very failure to communicate that was in some way driving my work, my passion, and my need to push beyond the purely theoretical.

It had been a constant irritation all my life, this inability to break through the conservatism of my peers, and their unwillingness to support my expansionism, my radicalism. I could feel my patience running out. Purely as an intellectual exercise I found myself rehearsing the sequence to shut down the fourteen levels of security. The best approach would be to invert the firewall and shift the virus directly into the target reality. Dispersal would be automatic on arrival.

I only needed to be sure I could then follow to the same reality plane myself to monitor the results.

SEBASTIÁN

Should we try to retreat back to the ladder that brought us down to this mad place? Could I manage to persuade Ruben to do that? Or should we stand our ground, as all the while the thing that did this to Ruben comes closer?

I had my orders to wait here. Together we had been so strong, so confident, the six of us. We had Matu's sense of purpose. We had our discipline as Guardsmen. Why did Matu leave me here? To suffer Ruben's fate when this thing comes for me, whatever it is. This madness that comes for me now.

Oh Inés, I wanted to make it right with you. I thought now of how we lay together in our bed the night before. We had made love but with a lack of real tenderness.

"What is it?" I asked her. "Why are you so angry with me?"

"It's not anger, Sebastián, it's fatigue. I'm tired of trying to find a way to make this work. No one looks at us and thinks we're all right. No one. The fact that we're not is written all over us, for everyone to see."

"Then what should I do? How can I make it better between us?"

"I'm not sure there is anything you can do. I just don't want to be the second most important thing in your life. And that's what I've always been, and what I always will be."

"I'm in the Winter Guard. One of the Duke's most trusted men. It's what's expected of me."

"I know that. Believe me I know."

"But you don't like it."

"I hate it, Sebastián. I hate it more with every day."

She had rolled away from me in the bed and wouldn't look at me again. I lay awake for a long while, wondering if there might be a way for me to change, to put her ahead of all other things, but I couldn't see how I could do that and still remain myself.

In the morning we barely spoke to each other, and I set off early to search the old city for people who were missing and might desperately need my help.

It was a noble thing we did, us Guardsmen, wasn't it? And if we are ruined now, there is no solace for me in any of it. Because I know Inés will never see how noble we were. It is very cold and dark here. Why should I try to save myself? She will be better off without me.

ALUNA

There were many prospective worlds we had already contacted, amongst the multiverse of infinite realities. Many of which we had people travelling to on a regular basis through stable portals. Such easily accessible worlds were not suitable for me. Paschendal and those of her ilk would only follow me there and undo whatever changes I sought to make.

I needed a world that flickered in and out of contact, one that was accessible now but then would be out of reach for hundreds of years at least. I would sow the seeds of my experiment and then divide my time between wakeful study of the results and periods of hibernation while

the society developed.

All that was required was split-second timing. I gathered the equipment I needed to bring with me and then barricaded myself in the security centre. While the alarms were ringing and the doorway was on the verge of collapse, I unlocked the safeguards and shifted the spores virus into this reality, and I followed after it.

My last sight of my home world was of Paschendal pounding her fist against the door as I escaped. And my first sight of this place was of a storm erupting all around me. I had thought my algorithms would drive enough power to the doorway to keep it stable right up until the last moment. But I saw now I had delayed a fraction too long, and it was collapsing whether I wanted it or not.

A reality pulse shuddered through the fabric of space and time, and laid waste to this city of Winter. Hundreds were buried and died as the buildings were destroyed.

SEBASTIÁN

For hours I sensed her presence, moving slowly in the distance. It was only later I knew what it was. *Her*. Then she began to move towards me. And the terror in me, the lost helplessness I had begun to suffer, alone in the darkness with only the mad Ruben for company, deepened with every step she took.

At last she came to stand in the light of my lantern. As I had glimpsed before, she had pale skin and long white hair. She wore a white tunic or uniform. Her eyes lacked any pigment, and one could wonder if they could see at all. But it was the spores, which in their intensity were unlike anything I had known before, that were both terrifying and intoxicating in equal measure. Ruben had curled into a foetal position and he whimpered like a starved dog. All I could do was lift myself from where I was sitting beside him, and kneel before her as anyone would in order to worship a god.

"Why are you here?" she asked me. Her voice was gentle and curious.

"We came to find people who have gone missing."

"Ah," she said. "Your people went missing because they came in search of me. They felt compelled to seek me out, without ever knowing why."

She was standing very close to me now. I could not bring myself to look at her.

"It is dark here," she said. "You should come with me."

I stood, and took my lantern from where I had wedged it. Some semblance of sanity made me glance back at Ruben.

"Oh, I almost forgot," the woman said. "We can't leave him like this."

She reached down and took his hand in hers. The life went out of him then, and he stopped breathing.

"He had nothing more to tell me," she said. I thought at the time that she sounded sad about it. But now I think it was a kind of disappointment she felt, if she could be said to feel anything at all.

I followed as she led the way. "Who are you?" I asked.

She paused, as if she were struggling to remember. "My name is Aluna."

It was a strange name, unlike anything in Winter City.

As we made our way through the streets of the old city I recognised the place Leandro and I had been searching earlier and the steep slope downwards where we decided to turn back. Thinking of Leandro made me remember my other fellow Guardsmen.

"What has happened to the others?" I asked.

"One is dead," she said. "Nothing has happened to the other three. If they were to turn back I would let them go, but likely they will not. You are all drawn to me."

"Why?"

"Because this is where everything changed. This is where the experiment began. It was my experiment. I was the catalyst for everything that happened here."

"I don't understand."

"Nor should you," she said. So I did not ask again.

We went deeper into the underground city. She led us into what appeared to be a disused building much like any of the others. But once inside, the place lit up as if bathed in sunlight. I

didn't know how that was possible, but it seemed she had control of special fire torches embedded in the wall and ceiling.

Lying on a table I saw Jorge's body. There was no life in him.

"Why?" I asked her.

"He was interesting. Much like you. He did not immediately go insane when I approached him. So I carried out some tests."

She placed a chair in front of me and told me to sit.

"So, tell me about your world," she said.

ALUNA

After my arrival I staggered through the chaos of Winter, confused and disoriented. Even at the eye of the reality storm I had been battered by the shockwave. Dust filled the air. Debris was strewn all around. I heard a great groaning sound and another huge fragment of a building crumbled and crashed to the ground.

I pictured the spores virus drifting on the air, invisible but already beginning to replicate within the cells of the survivors. Nothing would ever be the same again for these people, or for me. It seemed fitting, somehow, to wipe away the city that had been here before.

I heard a voice, faintly, from somewhere among the rubble. "Help me!" she begged. I drifted towards her, almost twisting my ankle in the process.

The woman's legs and an arm were broken out of shape. I knelt down beside her. "How can I help you?" I asked. She just stared up at me, uncertain what had happened.

Once, on Rai, one of my aides had malfunctioned – it was lurching around and had to be deactivated. This woman needed the same mercy from me, but I didn't know how to do it efficiently. I reached out to her but then her eyes closed and she lay still. So I walked away.

I survived, and so did many of the inhabitants of Winter. The spores virus took hold. My experiment began, and I have monitored its progress ever since. At first I lived among these people, and even took up a position on the city council. I watched with interest as they built a new Winter above the site of the old.

The new form of communication took a firm hold, and in time it spread to the other cities of this world. All their previously hidden emotions were written large for all to see. It was thrilling to witness them adapting to it. In time I think they forgot their lives had ever been otherwise.

But as I anticipated, I became infected myself. And the effect of my own spores on the people of this world became far more extreme than the effect they experience with each other. They are drawn to me, powerfully and inescapably. To minimise my impact I decided to spend as much time as possible in contained hibernation, emerging only rarely to see how their society was progressing. It suited me. Long term study had always been the goal.

SEBASTIÁN

Aluna injected a chemical into me. She read my spores in a way that was both excruciating and rapturous. The ordeal went on for hours.

She said, "I know you are curious about me, Sebastián."

By then I was weeping. I expected she would kill me, as she had Ruben and Jorge and probably all the people who had gone missing, drawn down here into her spider's web.

"There's no malice in it," she said.

Just a kind of cold indifference.

"Tell me about this Winter Duke. He has power over you all."

I tried but I could not collect my thoughts enough to say anything meaningful about the Duke. He had nothing compared to the power of the woman sitting before me, scrutinising my every thought.

Was that a hint of a smile on her face? Had I amused her, or was it only a kind of smug satisfaction?

She moved her chair closer to mine, so close we were almost touching. "I am flesh and blood, just as you are."

I wanted to reach out and touch her, to know if it was true. I hated myself for it.

"You love your wife," she said. "But despite everything the virus has given you, all the open-

ness, all the opportunity to understand each other fully, still there is discord between you."

She is worth more to me than you, I wanted to say.

"But still, you would love me if I asked it from you."

I hated her.

"Which of us? Which of us do you hate, Sebastián?"

Hate, desire, joy, misery, all intertwined. I didn't know any more where anything began or ended. I was vaguely aware of my heartbeat racing, of tears falling, of darkness pushing in. I believe I lost consciousness for a while.

ALUNA

This man's story was much the same as the others. I sought to improve communication for these people. I thought this would lead them in interesting new directions, perhaps more evolved than the sterile ways of Rai.

What I failed to anticipate is that the relative strength of a person's spores would dictate their status in the new social order.

Over the last weeks I had updated my findings, but there was no improvement. And there was no change of parameters, no course correction I could think of, that would help. The experiment was a failure, and my time was almost up. This world was not permanently beyond the reach of my home world. Centuries had passed and we were almost back in range. Would they come for me now, or had they forgotten me? Should I go home regardless, to explain myself and report my findings?

Sebastián's fellow Guards had almost reached me; I could feel them approaching. They would be no match for me unless I allowed it. Would it be better for me to die here, rather than be dragged screaming back to Rai?

I went to Sebastián and lifted his chin to face me. "Wake up, Sebastián," I commanded. And he did. "You should see this."

His men came into the room. They had their daggers drawn but by the time they were close enough to use them all spirit and fire had gone. They fell to their knees in worship, as most do when I encounter them. One of them screamed and dropped dead at my feet.

I was preoccupied and did not notice until the last moment that Sebastián had risen from the chair behind me. I spun around to face him but too late. His knife plunged deeply into my shoulder. I screamed in agony and fell to my knees, humbled for a moment.

I looked up and saw him, fierce determination etched into his face. He pulled the knife back out and raised his hand back. I could see he intended to swipe it across my throat and end me.

And I wondered vaguely if he could really do it.

SEBASTIÁN

I felt a rumble, a tremor in the earth as I prepared to strike. The world erupted in a flare of light. I hesitated to deliver the killing blow, and knew it would cost me everything. I would not get a second chance.

A team of men rushed in through a doorway of some kind, which was not there a moment before. They were completely covered in heavy clothing.

They called out to each other. I didn't understand their language, but their words were urgent – or more than that, I think they were *angry*. I saw a strange shimmering light envelop Aluna. One of the men looked at some kind of glowing block in his hand, then nodded.

Another man said something, more calm now.

Then they dragged her away, back through the doorway of light, which then vanished again. Another series of tremors shook the earth.

Matu and Leandro were recovering their senses. I pulled them to their feet. "Come on," I urged them. "We have to go."

We ran then, leaving our dead brothers behind. We ran back through the dark streets, ran all the way back to the ladder. We didn't know how many hours had passed, how bad the storm might be, or whether the hatch at the top of the ladder had been cleared by more of the Winter Guard according to Matu's instructions.

I went up first, turned the wheel of the hatch and shoved upwards. The hatch swung open and we emerged into bright morning sunshine.

Snow lay deep on the ground but the storm had ended and the hatch area had been cleared.

A couple of our fellow Guardsmen were sitting lazily in folding chairs, with a small kettle hooked over a fire, sharing mugs of some freshly made hot drink.

Later, I stood before the Winter Duke and I delivered my report. I find it difficult to describe who or what Aluna was. Although we discussed many things in the deep of the old city, I learned little of her nature and intentions. Little that I could understand. For much of the time I believe I was drugged and not in my right mind.

Matu and Leandro had recovered and appeared to have suffered no lasting injury.

"Have you retrieved the bodies of your fellow Guardsmen?" the Duke asked me.

"We have, Your Grace. I took a team back. We also found the bodies of many of the other missing people. There is no doubt they were drawn to Aluna, and that she killed them. She referred many times to experiments she performed, but I did not understand the details."

"And there was no sign of her?"

"No. I believe she came from some other place, and that she was forcibly taken back there, to pay for her crimes."

"Let us hope so," he said. He smiled contentedly. "Everything is as it should be now. I want that hatch to the old city sealed permanently."

"I will see to it, Your Grace."

He sensed in me a kind of renewed fervour, a richer, deeper quality in my spores. Like all powerful men, he assumed this reverence in me was actually a strengthening of my commitment to him. But it was not.

Once I thought my duty to the Winter Duke was the most important thing in my life. No longer. He was still the Duke, and I remained loyal to him. But he was small, and I had met someone who was like a god. And I had looked in wonder, into the true breadth and beauty of the universe.

ALUNA

There was a glass wall between myself and the woman who came to deliver their verdict. She said it coldly, with no trace of remorse.

"Aluna. It has been my great honour and privilege to track you down after many centuries of waiting. You have been sentenced to death."

I wanted to strike *her* dead.

"Let me guess, you're a Paschendal," I said.

"I am of that family line, yes."

"Well, Paschendal, you better bury me deep. I'm toxic."

She stared at me a long moment. "Do you have no remorse at all?"

I smiled. "If my experiment had been a success you would know the answer to that, without having to ask."

She turned to leave, hesitated, then said, "We will incinerate you, of course."

SEBASTIÁN

I returned home after all matters relating to the Aluna incident had been concluded. Slowly but definitely my relationship with Inés improved. She noticed a new attentiveness in me, a willingness to put her, and the children, ahead of others, wherever possible. And though I did not shirk my duties for the Duke, nor did I place them in higher importance than my love for my home and family.

Later that year another severe snowstorm fell upon Winter. At its height I went out to the garden at the back of our home. I knelt down in the freezing snow, cast my head back and gazed upwards, but I could not see the stars in the heavens, hidden beyond the white.

There was only a slight trace of concern evident in her spores when Inés came to the door, and called me inside. I went happily back into the warm. I knew there were many worlds above me, and I wondered at what I might find if I could go there to see. But I also knew, with a solid conviction, that those worlds were far away, and no more precious than my own.

Chris Butler's published fiction includes the novel *Any Time Now*, the novella *The Flight of the Ravens*, and short stories published in *Interzone*, *Asimov's*, and *The Best British Fantasy 2014*. He has also recently edited the short fiction anthology *The World and the Stars*. Visit Chris at chris-butler.co.uk.

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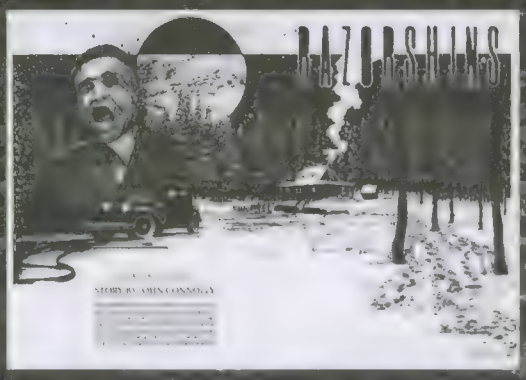

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SARA SAAB
RUSH DOWN, ROAR GENTLY

When Aya resolved to visit Zeina, it had been raining for one hundred and two days in Beirut.

The sky was a soggy hookah flint, a puree made of ash, and Aya did not think she would live to see another dry and sunny day. Nothing about her was ever dry those days, from her tired lungs, to the straggling white hairs of her eyebrows. Still, Aya would not let herself die without learning what had become of her friend. For that, she would haul her bent skeleton through a drowning city.

Once, Zeina had been Aya's co-conspirator, companion to her heart. The last time Aya had seen her, they hadn't stopped believing they could make the world a gentler place. But that had been thirty five years ago. Back then, they'd taken for granted the mercy of blue and cloudless skies.

There was one other reason for Aya's visit: Zeina's package. The one Aya had held onto since that last afternoon in Zeina's kitchen.

Droplets echoed in the stairwell above the din of the fritzed building stasis console. Aya hitched her body down the spiral steps, her dead husband's walking stick steadying her. Outside, she stood in silence, going from damp to drenched, her right hip throbbing.

At ground level, Beirut appeared to be dissolving slowly, a city enduring water torture, the decorative fenders of its stalled diesel-smelling lorries seeping into clogged asphalt. Rusty verandah rails dripped and flecked, microns of street furniture moving inexorably towards the sea. Electronic billboards strobed pixelated flashes, advertising garbled and sinister products no longer stocked anywhere.

Resignation and shock warred for Aya's thoughts. She had not left her house since the sixth day of the unstoppable rains. Every few mornings Hafeez the grocer downloaded her order from his shop's merchant portal, called round with preserved cheese, circles of bread, and a can of sardines, which Aya hoisted to her second floor apartment with a wicker basket strung on old washing line. Everyone who remained in the city had regressed into attitudes of endurance, dusted off – much later than the machine guns – from the days of the first civil war.

Zeina's package was bundled tight in its plastic sleeve, tucked into Aya's armpit. To think of it brought the sting of water to Aya's eyes. This water, this endless water. It had been inexcusable, what she had done. A kind of sentencing. A slow drowning, if Zeina was still alive. The blip of Zeina's house in the outdated neighbourhood directory system had never been available to contact, but neither had it been culled as defunct in all these years. Aya held fast to small hopes.

The avenue had the look and temperament of a dirty river, almost thigh-deep. Aya waded out, the walking stick balancing her, and oriented herself towards the sea. The synthetics of her slacks prickled against her papery skin. When she was in the middle of the road, a voice called to her. She followed it to find a man sitting on an upturned four-gallon jug on a raised patch of pavement.

"Where are you going without a boat, madame!" he pleaded, voice like a rifle crack. "It's suicide. Sit down, let me inflate a raft for you."

Without waiting for a response, the man unrolled a rubber raft from his stockpile as though it were a rug and worked a foot pump with energy. His short sleeves flapped, the brown skin beneath slick, black hairs along his forearms tracing a downward curve like bands of iron filings beneath the forcefield of descending water.

"Mohannad Alam," he said over his shoulder. "I live near the border where it's dry, up in the mountain, but the last of the money's in Beirut, selling rafts to people too stubborn to leave." He had a thick head of hair which he didn't bother to protect from the maddening downpour, instead leaving it to smother his brow like an oil slick. "Where are you heading in this hell, madame?"

Aya decided on the truth. "To find my dearest friend before I die."

Mohannad seemed sombre a moment.

"I'll come with you to paddle." It wasn't an offer, but assurance unasked for, in the forever way of Beirutis, selfless and meddling in equal measure. "Your friend worth the danger? With God himself trying to flick this failure of a land off the face of the Earth?"

Aya coughed, her lungs viscous. "The raft looks ready. If you're going to paddle, you can sit in the back."

IT WOULD HAVE been 2007 – Aya remembered because of the temporary dissolution of parliament that closed the year out. She sat at a long table under the awning of L'Auberge with five, ten others, all of them television journalists. Most vivid in her memory were her hands, the iron grip she exerted on a dew-drenched beer bottle, and her broadcast-ready French manicure.

At the table, they spoke of civil war. Her husband Elie sat to Aya's left, mopping sweat from his balding pate. His new walking stick rested against his thigh; a hookah pipe made round trips to the corner of his mouth. Ten months before, he had been injured by shrapnel covering the air strikes for Broadcast Beirut. It heartened Aya to hear his voice boom on a night out, calling for the waiter, countering their colleagues' political punditry with his own.

Aya remembered a quiet moment, her strong hand on Elie's forearm, the reality of the dangerous friction between Beirut's factions and dormant militias having momentarily silenced them all. The fog of evaporating lager and fragrant hookah smoke had seemed to blot out their flares of optimism, of heroism.

Then into the silence blared a megaphone, incongruous in the cobbled cafe boulevards of Beirut's moneyed Centre-Ville. The voice was a woman's, her syllables educated and precise, calling for the dissolution of government, for fair, non-partisan elections. She came clacking into their midst on six-inch patent leather heels, which every few steps snagged between the flagstones. Behind her trailed twos and threes of student protesters, artfully shabby, their glasses thick-rimmed and their jeans too baggy or too tight.

Aya watched this woman with her high society hairstyle and her dangling earrings, megaphone in hand, the other arm twirling in the air as if in polite joy at a live musical guest on air. And when the woman paused to extract her heel from a particularly tight wedge, Aya went over, said she was a journalist, asked to conduct an interview.

That was how she had met Zeina.

"HERE, LET ME paddle." Aya shimmied backward on the raft, her slacks slipping against inflated rubber.

"It's much better for you in front, madame," said Mohannad Alam. "Why don't you direct us from the front?"

"Because if I don't paddle, I'm going to lose it. Give me your seat."

Awkward and slow, they exchanged places. The raft pitched and twirled a half circle in the street-river. It was under-inflated, but to say so might insult Mohannad's professional pride. Aya trapped Zeina's package between her bony thighs and made a feeble attempt to direct the raft with the oversized spatula Mohannad handed her. What did it matter? The current was going downstream anyway, towards Zeina's house, towards the sea. Aya felt a bodily pain that seemed very much like that of a broken heart.

A woman's shout intruded: "Where are you going, you little shit? Who taught you to swim like a bloody seal?"

Sleek and brown, a puppy paddled out ahead of the boat. His perky ears spoke mischief, but maybe he understood the dangers of a drowning city as well as any of them. Before the current or flotsam could grab hold of him, his owner intercepted, grabbed him, and made for the raft, swimming and lunging in turns.

"Up here! What's brought all the crazy folk out into this deluge today?" Mohannad lamented, dragging the distressed pair onto the raft. They took on more water, and the raft would have flipped if Aya hadn't been pinning the opposite end with her weight. The woman and puppy skittered and slid about on the wet rubber, the puppy only slightly more off-balance than his owner.

"When I inhale, I swear it's fifty percent water," said the woman once she had righted herself. "The oxygen's saturated. You don't think so? I've had pneumonia five times in two months." The dog barked, a muffled sound. "Can we turn around? I need to take Gilles back home."

"Does it look like we can just turn around and drop you off, sister?" replied Mohannad from his hunched perch on the tube. "We're on business. This isn't a pleasant stroll, if you haven't noticed."

The woman shrugged at that. Gilles continued to bark in his hoarse, stifled way.

Beirut floated past, the breach in the sky interminable. There had been something about this city once, Aya knew. She and Zeina had fought

for it once. Now Aya could barely see it: the hardtack pre-war buildings, the railings and rusting scrap metal cars, the failed retail bots and unmaintained self-service kiosks for buying postage chips and paying municipal taxes, everything abandoned and gauzed in cataracts of water. The sky hung low and heavy as a drooping cedar with rot through its trunk.

Aya was cold, always cold, but now especially. Wetness slicked over her to steal the combustive heat of her body like a grabbing beggar.

The day was hot, sweltering. Exhaust fumes rose from the puckered roads cutting through the southern Beirut slums of Ouzai. They were on their way to the airport, to protest the return of government ministers from another round of grovelling talks at the League of Nations.

The Jeep hit every pothole on cue, even the ones in the oncoming lane of traffic. In the back, a selection of protest signs jostled a cooler filled with ice cubes and cartons of orange juice. Aya was queasy. Zeina's driving was terrible, even by Beirut's standards. From the passenger seat, Aya pressed her designer sunglasses snug against her cheekbones and maxed the questionable air conditioning.

Zeina startled at a noise. "You hear that?"

"Kalashnikovs."

"What are they celebrating?"

Aya huffed. "Do they ever lack an excuse? A wedding? A public statement? Something or other."

The sun shone bright off the Jeep's bonnet (Aya shivered now, to remember the warmth, that light in endless supply). The percussion of gunfire picked up.

Zeina swore lavishly. "Do bullets grow like turnips around here? Do kids dig them up after school?"

"They probably do dig them up," reflected Aya. "All those shots sent skywards eventually come down."

"Mmm," said Zeina, swerving onto a service road. "Occasionally picking off a neighbour stupid enough to be cheering along from the balcony."

"Where are you going? You're heading towards the shots. Zeina!"

"This world needs to be taught a few things about civility."

They emerged from between crumbling storefronts into the heart of the slum, the building materials here mostly corrugated iron sheeting and cinder blocks. Antennas and telephone wires and clotheslines crisscrossed indiscriminately, a child's pencil scratches across a graffiti-stark landscape. Ahead of the Jeep on the road, a procession of militiamen and neighbourhood partisans pumped fists in the air. Sunlight glittered on a dozen machine guns held vertical above the crowd.

Gunfire sounded again, then a collective rallying cry.

Zeina parked in the middle of the road. She did not stop to consider, did not weigh options, did not turn to Aya. Instead she jumped out of the Jeep, leaving keys in the ignition, and ran towards the procession, uselessly protecting her head with her hands.

"Zeina!" Aya scrambled out of the car, thankful she wasn't wearing on-air heels. Zeina disappeared into the milling crowd. Aya jogged after her, wondering if the television station's car would still be there when she came back.

The teenagers and stilted twenty-somethings of Ouzai, gathered for the rally, whispered her name as she passed between them.

Aya Assif. From the evening news.

"Lovely Aya!" called a man in an exaggerated baritone.

"Godless whore," came a reply.

Sweat had drenched the armpits of her lace blouse by the time she found Zeina facing down the young owner of a machine gun, her sermon fierce and fearless.

"...endangering your own neighbourhood. Look at those kids watching from their roofs. Are they your sisters? Your relatives? You could kill them with that gun!"

He turned to protest to his friends at the intrusion. He wouldn't hit a woman in the street, he said. But what was she up to, coming here?

Aya grabbed Zeina by a slender, tanned arm. "Let's go."

Giggling children clustered around Aya, wary, darting in to shake her hand or tag her knee. She was as big a celebrity as this Ouzai slum was

likely to see, but underneath that, a non-partisan, a moneyed modernist, and that put her at odds with this crowd.

She could hear the gathering hostility warring with starstruck awe.

"You need to think, little boy," Zeina was saying to the gunman. "We only have one country. Unfortunately we have to share it."

Aya tugged her hard, and another chant went up, pledging undying loyalty to the local militia – loud, louder than before, an incensed rejection of their presence.

"You have balls for brains," Aya said as they climbed into the car. "You maniac!"

Adolescent boys milled about. Zeina reversed the whole way to the main road, in too much of a hurry to execute a three-point turn.

"Who'll pry this place back, if not us?" Zeina said once they were back on the main road, her quiet anger smouldering hotter than Aya's outburst. "One day Beirut will be nothing but dust, and it'll be our fault."

.....

Not dust exactly, thought Aya. *More precisely sludge.* Steady rain came down, had topped up the pool in the bottom of their raft. Zeina was right. They *had* failed to pry this place back, long before the universe decided it would force a do-over by washing away the unsuccessful graft of civilisation.

Beside her in the raft, Mohannad Alam was giving the woman – had Aya heard her say her name was Nazek? – a treatise on the price of house robotics, the unravelling of the pathetic Lebanese cryptocurrency exchange. It was a sort of flirtation, an intellectual primping. Gilles scrabbled over to Aya and sniffed behind her leg.

"I know how you feel," Aya told him, holding her breath against the smell of wet, scared dog.

Nazek gave a cynical laugh. "It's all the poor thing has ever known. He's only three months old."

Around them, the weeds of Beirut's exuberance sprouted through the drowned tarmac. Old LED signage, like the bones of a hollow skeleton, stood above a rusted soft serve ice cream machine leaning sideways in a foot of water. Next door, a five-level parking lot had been barricaded shut; a sign near the attendant's stall still claimed to house 'sexy cars' and 'airbornes, as long as they clear the gate'.

Aya felt declawed, fading, anonymous. The only thing in her that wasn't water, wasn't diluted by water, was this last attempt to make something right. How could it be more than three decades on? They had, after all, resisted so little and allowed so much.

There were few people about on the streets, here and there the odd stubborn resident who made Mohannad his living. The raft floated towards a lone policeman in a half-buttoned uniform, the pants cut off at the knee. He fiddled with a digital walkie-talkie, so weathered and clunky it must have been nearly as old as he was. Mohannad jumped out of the raft and dragged it free of the weak current.

"May you be well," Nazek said to the policeman in customary greeting, sounding insincere.

"God keep you," he replied, still busy with the gadget.

"Are you on shift, officer?" asked Aya.

"Yes, madame." He looked up. "Keeping Beirut safe," he added with a sarcastic smile.

"Safe from the end times?" Mohannad said, and gave a sour laugh. "Go home to your wife, kid. Pretty soon this whole coast is going to fall into the sea. The end of us all."

That got the policeman's attention. "I should be telling you the same thing, wiseass. Who's the police around here? What are you doing sailing about in this catastrophe? Looting, I bet." He craned his neck into the raft, put his hand on an empty holster.

"My name's Aya Assif, sir. I've got a message to deliver down at Bains Militaire."

Mohannad whistled.

"You're not Aya Assif!" said Nazek in disbelief. "Lady Spartacus? The journalist who planned the failed coup of 2010?"

"Believe me or don't," said Aya, irritated. "If you don't, then at least don't get in the way of the final duty of my life." She turned to the policeman. "Who pays your wages, sir? If you don't mind my asking. I just… I have no clue who runs this country anymore."

"Who knows?" he said. "All I know is I get a bank credit at the end of every month. The squadron I reported to was disbanded for good

a few weeks ago."

That settled in silence for some time. Then the policeman said in a trained voice, "Best be getting on before the light fades." And he bobbed his barely bearded chin, as if to motion them through a military checkpoint of the war days.

Mohannad jumped back in the raft, setting it bobbing and twirling again. The current found it.

"May you be well," said Aya. "And stay dry."

IT WAS THE winter of 2010, and frigid cold wrapped Beirut, snuck through its alleys and wreathed its cul-de-sacs. Aya stood side by side with Zeina in the heated courtyard of the Assif family estate, unseeing.

She couldn't see the queue of black-clad visitors, couldn't feel the robotic procession of handshakes and perfumed prim kisses. She couldn't feel her own voice emanating from her throat, though she was nearly hoarse with repeating the words.

"Thank you for coming. God keep you."

One thing she could feel was the throb of her lacerated left arm, fixed in a cast. It pounded out the rhythm of Aya's heartache.

Yesterday, after the early news report, she had stood in the entrance of the television studio where she and Elie both worked, watched him get into his car, and waved as he turned the key in the ignition. In the next instant the car was a tall fireball, and Elie was gone forever.

Aya could not stop imagining him rubbing his hands together for warmth in the November air before starting the car, sure of his immortality.

He was a martyr, the television analysts said. A hero. But this was a city that could take your life for having the wrong opinions about the wrong things, even if you could not conceive of dying so savagely, a loved one watching, feet away.

Beirut was a monster with a maw as wide as the Mediterranean.

Zeina had been there beside the hospital bed while Aya was bandaged and treated for shock. She hadn't left since. That evening, Zeina made sandwiches for them, disdaining all the food from the wake, tainted as it was with Elie's blood. They ate flatbread wraps spread with tomato paste and olive oil, comfort food, village food.

Aya and Zeina closed up the house together, hours later. There were few words to say. The corpses of Elie and of Beirut lay dampening between them, even when they held each other on the couch smelling of history.

"I'm done," said Zeina when it came time to say goodnight. Her head shook reflexively against Aya's temple.

"I know," replied Aya. "I know."

NAZEK BEGAN TO wail, head back, her tongue collecting raindrops.

"How can this be happening? How can it rain this long without let up?" She turned her palms up at the sky, then slapped them to the sides of her face.

"Hold yourself together, woman," said Mohannad. "We're almost there."

"Almost where? Tell me, where?" said Nazek. She cried, banged fists against the raft. Gilles came over to her, sniffing. She picked him up and, without hesitating, hurled him into the floodwater. Aya's breath caught.

"You've lost your mind!" said Mohannad.

Aya watched the puppy break the surface, then paddle towards higher ground and scramble onto low wall. "He's better off," she whispered to Mohannad.

"Shall I throw her overboard?" he asked.

"Let me talk to her," Aya said.

She scooted over to Nazek, held her by the waist, and searched for a long while for something helpful to say.

Finally she tried, "One-hundred-and-two days of rain is the only way to wash all the blood from under Beirut's fingernails." Her voice was weak and shy in her ears.

Nazek heaved fresh sobs into her hands and Aya stroked her head with wrinkled fingers.

Then Aya noticed the horizon. "The lighthouse. The Ferris wheel. Bains Militaire. We're here."

The strangers in her raft looked up. Mohannad grabbed the oar and churned dirty water with powerful strokes. Maybe they too held fast to some deliverance, some small victory in this. Hope had a shameless survival instinct.

When they paddled around the corner onto the street Aya remembered so well, her heart wrung itself out in her chest. In the distance, the ancient Ferris wheel did a creaky quarter turn

under the weight of its top cabins collecting the rain.

Aya shivered. Pregnant droplets fell from the ridge of her jaw. The lighthouse, unlit, was almost perfectly camouflaged against the blanched tones of the city. The sea raged. Zeina's house would be at the end of this street, one of the few two-storey villas in a row of shabby apartment buildings.

Aya pointed the way for Mohannad, heart drumming.

THE MONTH AFTER Elie was murdered, Aya had decided to gamble. She knew she had a captive audience in every living room, in front of every television set. She knew – the producer had told her – that there were more of them watching her newscasts now that she was a car-bomb survivor, a widow. A grotesque snuff film.

She had declared a people's takeover, a peaceful coup. They had come in droves, her supporters, to stage rallies and sit-ins millions strong. They called her Lady Spartacus, waved flags printed with her profile. At the height of it, she had been flanked by hundreds of protesters as she walked up the steps to the Presidential Palace and knocked on the door, demanding the President's resignation. Still-loyal guards had eventually come to the door, blinking, like moths fluttering from a rolled up carpet. They had escorted Aya and the protesters off premises, guns more persuasive than their words.

She served jail time after that, a few years, a slap on the wrist in a city where treason was the norm and prisons were revolving doors for the political elite.

"STOP HERE," SAID Aya. They drifted towards a utility box above the submerged curb. Opposite Zeina's old house, the buildings parted, and she could make out where the graffitied boulders of the seawall huddled in the shallow surf of the Mediterranean.

No lights were on in the house. Aya watched her white-haired reflection in the rain-spattered windowpane of the kitchen; read for signs of impending collapse in the way her brow knitted. Behind her in the raft, Nazek cleared her throat after another bout of sobbing and Mohannad muttered a readying prayer. *Our fate's in the hands of God.*

Aya flicked water off both sides of Zeina's package. She inventoried, through the thick plastic bag, the ID card, the three credit cards. The French passport beneath, with its gold emblem of a shield overlaid on oak and laurel branches. The items were relics from the past. Even the crumbling Lebanese government had long ago switched to biometric identification. Relics or not, they were Zeina's, and deserved to be returned.

Aya let herself out of the raft, pushing away Mohannad's steadying hands on her shoulders, holding tightly to Elie's stick. Water rose above her knees.

Some way behind her, on the boardwalk, the Ferris wheel groaned in the wind.

"WHERE WILL YOU go? This is our city," said Aya. "I'll never forget what you told that boy, that day on the way to the airport – we only have one country. It'd still be the truth, even if we each carried twenty different passports."

That remark had stilled Zeina's hands, busy at the stove, stirring a pot of coffee. No sign of shame could have been clearer. She was a westerner by record, even if her soul burned brightest in the neon streets surrounding the University, in the affluent coffee houses of Centre-Ville, on the sand beaches stretching towards the suburbs. In Beirut.

"I'm going to Paris," Zeina said, almost noiselessly. "I've already booked my flight."

"Zeina, please. Stay for Elie's memory," replied Aya, her own shame a sudden jab at pressing his name into service. "Stay with me. Fight back. I'm not just the daughter of a good house. I know people. I can *mobilise* people. My show is a path into thousands of hearts." A pause. "We've put years of work in together."

When Aya rose to look her friend in the eye, Zeina took the coffee off the stove and excused herself to use the bathroom, hands trembling.

That's when Aya saw the stack of travel documents on the hallway table. In a panic she shoved the crisp, seldom-used French passport into her handbag, then the credit and ID cards.

When Zeina returned from the bathroom, they sipped coffee in dejected silence. Aya spent that

hour worrying about a tell: about guilty hands, guilty eyes.

It had never occurred to her that this would be the last time she would see Zeina. Why would it? She had Zeina's travel documents, all her bank cards. Sooner or later, Zeina would try to get them back.

AYA HAD MEANT merely to delay Zeina, all those years ago. To give her time to think. But something had gone wrong.

Zeina had never come round for her belongings, not even when the French embassy closed its offices three months later, after a string of political targetings. Nor had Zeina ever sent a word of encouragement, not even at the height of Aya's attempted coup. When Aya asked about her, their mutual contacts shook their heads. "She told us not to say anything to you."

After her years in jail, Aya would go to Zeina's house, and on the few occasions when anyone was in, the housekeeper always answered the door. "Not here. Not here," the curt old woman would say, and rush to shut Aya out.

Aya waded over to that same door now, and tried the familiar curled handle beneath the rusting access panel. It didn't give. A plaque, set above the gouged hole that had held the doorbell, still displayed Zeina's surname. Aya wiped at it with her shirt, smearing water, endless water. Her hip throbbed like a metronome.

"The electricity's gone out again," said Nazek from the raft. "No lights in any of the buildings down the street."

"Most likely she's gone to the mountains, madame," Mohannad called. "No one would stay down here, so close to the sea."

"Maybe," said Aya. "Either way, it's too late."

There was a bare ledge beneath the kitchen window where Zeina used to scatter birdseed. Aya placed the package there and kicked around for a heavy object to weigh it down. She dunked her head in and retrieved a broken roof tile, steadied the precious package on the sill.

She was spitting water when she heard an off-tune whistling emerge from behind the house. Her voice caught; she had to rely on her shaking legs to carry her around the corner of Zeina's porch.

There, a young man in waist-high rubber waders was reinforcing the living room windowpane with grout. His deft hands slowed when he noticed her.

"Is Zeina here?" Aya managed. They were the only words she seemed to have.

"Zeina? My grandmother Zeina?" he said, lifting his sleeveless shirt up to wipe his brow.

Aya felt herself begin to cry. So, a son, or daughter. Grandchildren. New experiences after their friendship had ended. Life.

"Are you okay, madame? Do you need to sit down?" the young man asked, looking confused. "My grandmother hasn't lived here in years. She has a house in Paris, where the world isn't ending, you know? I come down here every few weeks to keep her house from floating away."

Aya looked up at the churning sky and its mirage of raindrops, and saw or invented a promising lightening of the rain. She gingerly turned in the floodwater.

"I get a call every weekend about moving to France," he added to Aya's back. "She always thought this place was crazy."

"DID YOU FIND her?" asked Mohannad, helping Aya into the raft.

"No, not today," said Aya.

"Maybe we can try again tomorrow," said Mohannad.

"And maybe it's all rained out," Nazek said, her voice finally calm, even lilting. The droplets had definitely slowed to a light patter.

"Maybe," said Aya. "Either way, it's better now. Less broken." They couldn't have known she was talking about her heart.

"Get comfortable. It'll take me hours to row us upstream," said Mohannad. "I don't know why I agree to these things," he complained quietly to himself, and Aya heard herself laugh for the first time in one hundred and two days.

Sara Saab loves crunchy nougat, crowded cities, and the sound boxing pads make when you punch them dead centre. She was born in Beirut, Lebanon, near the lighthouse, but now lives in North London. Her flat houses one wonderful human boy, two giant Lego heads, and a silk carpet as ornate as the ceiling of a cathedral. You can find Sara on Twitter as @alixanaeuphoria and at alixanaeuphoria.com.

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AFTER HIS KIND

RICHARD W. STRACHAN

ILLUSTRATED BY RICHARD WAGNER

PEOPLE WERE HARDER, HE THOUGHT as they led him to the cave. Real people. But the others were long gone now, and not a name or a face came back to him when he called. The worms though, the planarians . . . he remembered the worms. The idea of them was so simple there was little to forget.

The day's first rain began to fall, a quick freshet that left a swatch of bubbles on the soil and set the leaves all glistening like hard plastic. He could see from the other side of the valley a pale twist of smoke rising from the new settlement. It was almost ready; they were moving on, aiming for new spaces to settle.

The clouds, now lightened of their loads, swam off across the scrub where the scar of the crash site had long since healed. He could see it from up here as just a darkness in the grass, a mellow dip where the carved land had regrown, feeling at the same time the old pain unlace inside his bicep and ravel down to the hinge of his elbow. He put his left hand to it and softly squeezed. Flames, the vigorous fire, a ripple of electric light; then yawing up towards them came that fierce atmosphere, light and dark, the hot sound of screaming…

Their names, their faces. He couldn't bring them back.

One of the children came up from the village, running.

Father!

Is it almost ready?

Yes Father.

Come then. Take me to it.

He paused, and looking down from this height, gazing on all his children as they woke and began to cluster nervously around the Worm Farm, he wondered again if what he had done hadn't, after all, been a terrible mistake.

The children hung back as he approached; here only the Father could proceed. Although it had taken him years and much patient theology to develop these taboos, most of it seemed to have evolved on its own particular course, and he was beginning to suspect that little had stemmed from his direct influence. You cannot predict the course of a river. All the same, he raised a benedictory palm as he passed, nodding to the genuflections.

The Worm Farm was a circular building at the far edge of the village, tucked inside the first line of the forest, where the undergrowth slobbered to the base of the walls and the ivy crept in virulent strings to smother the squat chimney. There were sprays of yucca and fern bursting from the forest, the great bladed leaves sheltering the structure, dripping now with emerald and violet from the passing rain. The door was covered with a curtain of vines. He pushed it aside. Before he entered he looked back at the children, standing there absently wringing their hands, their faces slack and distressed. He looked away. It was difficult to watch them sometimes. He tried to keep them always in the corner of his eye.

Before going in he rapped gently on the ceramic wall, on one of the heat shields salvaged from the wreckage. It was humid and close inside, ripe with a rich, fecund smell. The chimney admitted only a thin channel of air. He stood by the door until his eyes adjusted.

It was lying on a bed of leaves in the centre of the room, the leaves harvested from the forest; broad plates of russet and amber dusted with a soft and velvet-like covering of hair, the pale sap like viscous semen, smelling of lime and cinnamon. Its skin seemed to glow in the darkness, a grey, fungoid light. In the early days they always looked to him like roots, something tuberous and cold dug up from the deep earth; then they started to grow, and from that cold and burgeoning cylinder of flesh came a warm and extraordinary thing. Not for the first time he wondered what would have happened if he had thought about all this sooner, if he had made plans and outlined strategies, if in fact he had thought about it at all?

He stepped into the room. The ache was deep in his shoulder now.

The trunk was trembling slightly, and he could see that the nub of its head had fleshed out enough to bud two vestigial eyes. There wasn't much longer to go. He could already see the mirrored trace in the blindly swaying features, the eyes now straining at their covering sheath. He would sit with it until nightfall. At this late stage the growth was almost visible, the flesh shivering and extending moment by moment as he watched. The mouth began to open. From deep in its chest came a short and quavering whimper, a mournful note that trailed off into a soft and satisfied little gurgle.

Could it sense him? It seemed to nuzzle itself closer to his legs as he sat there. He laid one hand across its forehead, the other on its chest where the skin was cool and moist.

We're almost there, my son, he said. Almost there. And to help you on your way I'm going to tell you a story. This is how the world began…

He remembered the worms, the planarians. He thought of them often; grey, flat things flexing in their runnels of mud, latching themselves to the tank's glass walls, those palping mouths, the glisten of their skin. There were ants as well, busy tunnelling through the nutrient gel that packed their transparent canisters, and glossy caterpillars and snails busily consuming the forests that contained them, but the planarians were the writhing heart of his menagerie. Every morning he leant in with the scalpel to make his incisions, watching their flesh spring back and snap as the blade parted their skin. He noted down his observations, at the end of each week feeding the data into his spreadsheets – how they reacted to different temperatures, how long each severed segment took to regrow. Such basic things, gestural creatures really, and not even sophisticated enough to die. There was a comfort in that thought, he supposed, that death was almost an achievement, an event that reflected the scale of what it had left behind. He wrote all this up in his field notes. He sketched stars and spiralling nebulae in the margins. There was nothing to these creatures, but at the same time he felt there was nearly everything. In the right conditions they would live forever.

The others, young and adventurous, teased him for being so diligent. He was old to them and pedantic with it, pottering about with his experiments, his safety drills, his stock inventories. But didn't they all have a job to do? Who's to say that in the end his wasn't the most important job of all? He loved them for it, although he would never have admitted as much.

His equipment had been in the rear, next to the galley, and it was his diligence that saved him. He had been checking it over, making sure that everything was properly stored, when the air seemed at once to ignite around them, and suddenly, interposing itself between the front and the rear of the corridor, a shimmering, heat-haze curtain of flame descended. He wanted to reach out and part it with his hands, to peer beyond the veil, but then the great gouging plough of the craft was carving a trench, nose first, in the virgin ground.

The rest of them battled at wheel and rudder until the fuel tanks began to spew out geysers of fluid. He saw them writhe in the flames, his friends, these spinning columns of orange and red, and then the crash had gripped him like a hand. He was picked up, discarded, striking his head against the worm tank. The glass shattered, and in the fire all the planarians fizzled out into black little scabs as beams and joists and panels were torn away, everything disintegrating in this blizzard of steel, and he fell, he fell, he was falling…

Yes, he said. Your Father fell, into the light of this world. And just think, he was the first to ever set foot on it.

He watched the craft unravel in the valley. A plain of flora, shocking and abundant, the vast and towering gymnosperms torn up by the roots, arcs of flame from the burning wreckage setting a fire in the grass that swept hungrily towards him. It was only as he stood to run, the flightsuit smoking on his body, that he realised the arm was gone. He saw, then felt; and the scream that he spat was as red as the blood that pulsed from the ragged joint. The torn sleeve made a mad semaphore in the breeze.

The arm was lying a little way ahead of him, curled as though beckoning him on. He clutched it to his chest, stumbling up to the high rocky ground with the flames roaring around him, the cave just a black circle in the stone. He carried the arm there like a rescued child. Before he passed out he had the wit to make a tourniquet from his smouldering tool belt. The valley below crackled under a black sheet of smoke.

Your Father's dreams that night were red and black, he said. There were no stars, just the ghost of a moon. I slept.

If the dreams were red and black, the world he woke to was a field of green. The wreckage still smoked in the valley, but the land that cradled it was lush and verdant, as if the fire had passed clean over and left everything untouched. All that burned had grown again, thriving up in no more than a night. The mutter of the pain in his stump suggested that the wound itself was somehow healing.

There was a stream rustling from the stones above the cave. He left the severed limb inside and crawled out into the light, latching himself to the water, sucking the ice into his mouth until his jaw throbbed and his teeth were singing with the cold. There were berries clustered on the bushes. He ate his fill, turning to pluck with his left hand whenever he reached with his absent right.

The day flashed away from him, a collage of light and colour. He lay on the cave floor, sleeping now and then, and now and then crawling to lap at the water outside. None had survived, he knew that. The others were dead. Those he had travelled with through such darkness, out to these far edges, to the rim of nothing, were gone. He wept for them, feeling the pain in his arm expand and contract like the gasping mouths of the planarians he had so diligently studied. They had burned away, whispers in the smoke that rose up to meet the clouds. Did they fall now in this lightly coloured rain; in shades of magenta and violet, in soft lemon and gold? So young. They had been like children to him.

He couldn't part from the limb. He found himself holding it in the crook of his left arm, pressing his face to its cold skin. For a day and a night he wrestled with the loss, wrenching his mind around to the idea of being so diminished. More even than this marooning, the loss of the arm demolished him.

It was on the third day that he noticed the change. He'd been huddling in the cave when the arm, which he couldn't bear to bury, began to move.

It was no trick of the light. He heard as well as saw the twitch, saw the fingernails scrape up the dirt from the cave floor, and when he picked it up, putting his lone hand to the severed limb, he felt the pulse of life in it. A nerve quickening under the skin, its light flutter.

He tended it over the days, this tuber in the mud. He carried the arm down with him into the fertile valley where the wreckage was silent and grey, thronged after no more than a week with thick and near-impenetrable vegetation. He made a sling from his shirt and tucked the arm against his chest. The dead fingers, blindly searching, reached up to cup his chin, to pat their tips against his mouth. The thumb stroked gently at his stubble. His stump still beat with the drum of its pain but the wound had healed over, a taut stretch of glossy skin, soft and pink.

The front of the craft was no more than a shell frosted with black carbon, the steel frame warped and twisted by the force of the crash. There was nothing left of the others, except the suggestion of an outline in the cockpit, a humanoid shadow smeared against the melted leather and plastic of the pilot's seat.

The rear of the ship had detached and broken up, and it was here in the central tube, lying by the edge of the river, that he found stored food and clothes mostly untouched by the flames. He saw the broken tanks, the empty cages, the dust and ashes of all that had died. He took what he could carry back to the cave. The arm in its sling clenched and then flexed its fingers. He held its hand. He kissed its palm.

It was a time of dream-like coherence for him. Over a few days he watched the arm expand, a pinched flap of skin bloating out and thickening into a central trunk. The next week another arm began to sprout, and then another growth budded and flowered into a strange little cobbled head, the face on it stained with gestural eyes and mouth. From the trunk came two more tubers that lengthened into legs. The head, swelling and elongating into an oval, was covered at the top with a greasy fringe of hair. He watched two dark patches define themselves into nipples, the skin tags between the legs dilate into an adult penis and scrotum. While all this was happening, while he coaxed and sang his chanted lullabies to the growing thing, his own arm began to return, first as an itch in the severed joint, then as a fused trio of rubbery fingers that seemed to reach out from the meat of him. One day, from the wound where his forearm had been torn away, came a pale imitation. It was distinguishable as well; where was that scar on his knuckle, the white crescent of a childhood injury? The arm looked new, as if taken directly from the source code, and by the time it had regrown completely he was no longer the only man in the cave.

It looked like him. It was him, he knew this. It aped his age exactly, although there was some-

thing fresher and younger in the skin, in the eyes that sleepily opened and observed him. He smiled. It looked on him with the valueless certainty of an infant.

He taught it to walk, holding its hands while it trembled upright and found the measure of its strength. He fed it mashed berries taken from his own mouth. He taught it to speak and it learned in diurnal leaps and bounds. He cleaned its waste from the cave and taught it where to squat on the lower slopes. He tried to explain where it had come from, where he had come from, pointing and laughing at the starless night, taking its hand to lay against the soft muscle of his new arm. The night sky was a void, velvet and black.

From the crash site he took panels and steel rods, and from the clay by the riverside he made bricks laced with dried grass. They built a little hut for shelter, and a short stroll brought a dozen different foods to the hand – berries, nuts, fruit. There were birds, great plumed and vivid things that he would later learn to trap, and fat, placid squirrels that he could stun with a single blow whenever the need for meat came on them. He called the new one 'Child', and Child called him 'Father'. Together they explored the forest and the course of the river, the first few miles of the fertile valley that rolled away to a distant line of hills.

Where did the answer come from? The soil? You could sink your hand to the wrist in this black, moist clay, the residue on your fingers thick as paint, where seeds, like a challenge, were only to be thrown down before they grew. Or was it that faint double sun, the pale corona flaring like a crown above the first star's silver dome? Quality of light, quality of air, quality of earth. Was this a place where none would die? He found himself looking for his friends, hoping to glimpse them resurrected in the trees or loping through the far grasses, but for whatever reason they did not come back. Too emphatically destroyed perhaps, no foundation left on which they could build. He was alone, alone with Child.

A year fell away, although it was difficult to judge the passing of time here, where each season faded sleepily into each. To start with they both lived in the hut that he had built from the wreckage, but then one morning he swept out his hand to demonstrate the walls around them.

All this is yours, he said. Child, I give this to you. I must not sleep here.

Where will you go Father?

He stood outside and pointed to the cave at the top of the hill. He felt the need to make himself separate. It was becoming difficult to spend as much time alone with it.

I need to look over the world I have made, he said. To keep you safe.

The idea brewed murkily in him.

Do you understand Child?

It was a child, essentially. He thought of it as one, no matter how old it seemed. It looked to him not so much for protection as for information, or as a model for the life it had somehow found itself occupying. But as the year passed he began to look on it and feel himself in a small way dislocated by its presence. He would stare into its eyes and feel as if a false move could trip him up, and if he fell into that searching gaze he wasn't entirely sure that he would ever be able to climb out. Talking to it was like standing in front of a locked door and hearing on the other side the low, half-silent sound of somebody breathing.

But there was no real change, even when he moved to the cave. Mornings became something to be dreaded. He would wake to see it standing there at the bottom of the hill, waiting for him as the double-sun flared up on the other side of the mountains and threw down a vivid spear of light against the grasslands of the valley. It was always there, waiting, looking to him for an example to follow, and that he couldn't provide.

What have I done, he would think in these moments. What have I made?

He would stand at the mouth of the cave and look out on the valley, imagining the plain filled from the mountains to the river with his children, and him stood here high above them with the tablets of the Law in his hands. Leaning in to make his incisions, to gather his data…

He called it to the cave at dusk.

Yes Father?

You must help me, he said. There is something that must be done. Your Father commands it.

There were tools that they had fashioned from

the wreckage, and he held one out to it. The edge was true.

You hold here, he said, taking its hand and laying it against his elbow. He was lying on the dirt floor. And you put all of your weight behind the blade. Do you understand?

Yes, but…

There can be no questions. If I say that this is what must happen, then this is what must happen.

He bit down on the stick in his mouth and mumbled, Did your Father not tell you this is how the world was made?

Take the new one to the hut, he told it. This is now the Worm Farm, and we must always call it by this name. Tend me in the cave; bring me food and water. Once the new one has been placed inside the Farm, you must leave it and not go back inside. On no account go back inside, because that is now a sacred space. When the fourth moon rises you must call for me. From the Worm Farm I will bring out new life.

So it took the blade to his arm, and made the primal cut.

When the eyes slid open he smiled. He helped it to its feet. On trembling legs it padded around while he held its hands and led it towards its dormant strength. The face, mask-like, impassive, the eyes that ranged over all the detail of his kind expression, missing nothing, taking everything in. On that calm water not a ripple of interest showed.

Early days, early. The world is new again.

He led it naked from the Worm Farm, his arm around its shoulders. It blinked at light and people, all these people who looked exactly the same. Sounds came from its open mouth.

Two rushed forward with clothes to cover it. They gathered it in and led it away. They had their own places of preparation now, their own tabernacles and ceremonies of initiation, and

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he knew nothing about them. He knew so little about his children, although in each, caught when the light fell at the right sharp angle, was a pallid glimmer of the man he had once been.

He stretched his arm, the pain igniting along the muscle, sinewy and ever-present. He flexed his fingers until it sank into the bone. He looked at his hand, missing that old scar against the knuckle, the earned distinction from a separate world that he would never see again. What he wouldn't give to go back.

This way, Father.

Two of them came to help him back up towards the hill, towards the cave. It would be a new moon tonight. He looked to the sky, the shield of blue.

Do you know, he said, where I came from the months last four weeks? Here, it's only one.

Yes Father, they said.

Again?

Yes Father.

Ah.

One carried the polished steel, the other held the flint and the bit. A third scattered scented water from a censer on the path in front of them as they climbed.

A breeze moved through the village. He could smell what he had come to call meadowsweet, and on the edge of that smell was the faint hint of woodsmoke brought over from the new settlement. He could see more of them preparing to leave, dozens, hundreds, some to join their brothers, some to move in pioneering groups beyond the hill, towards the far horizon and those mountains. Soon it would be true, the world would be full of his Children. He remembered the worms, the spasm as the blade bit.

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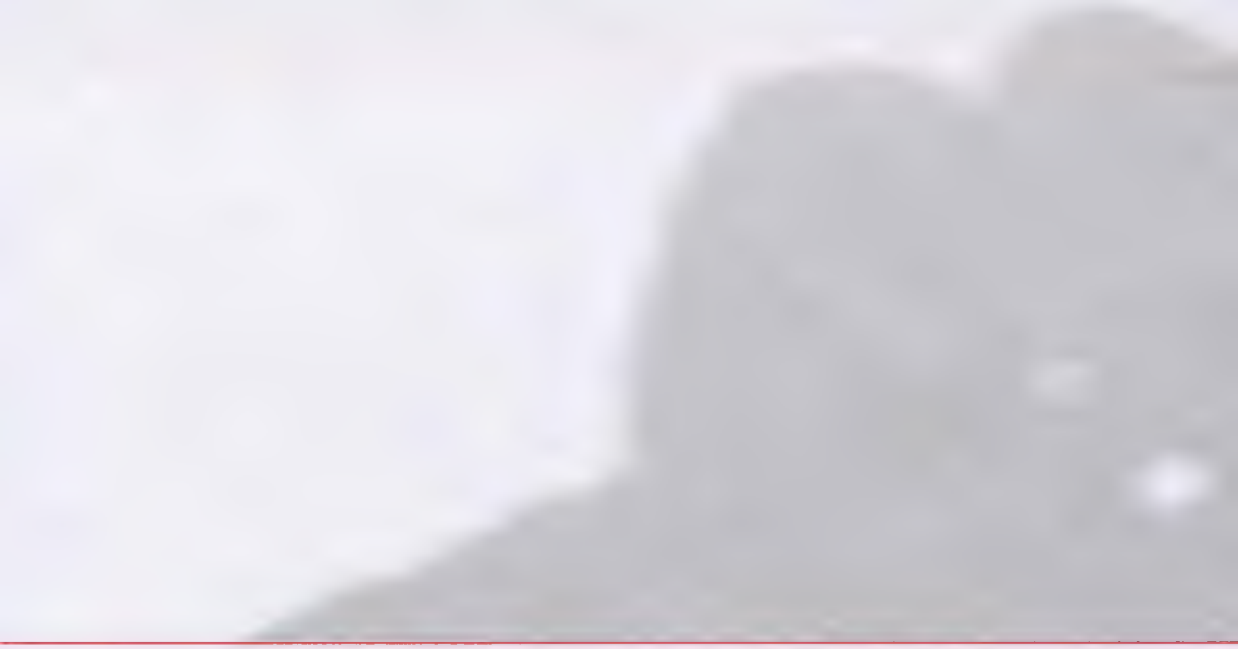

For some reason I thought Wyatt would look different after getting Edited, but when he steps out onto the porch of his parents' reefhouse summer rental, swilling a Corona and swiping my *we're here* skype off his tab, he's the same as ever. Still tall and bony with gray eyes and pale blonde hair that looks like it'll stick to your hand but doesn't.

He stuffs his tab into the pocket of his chinos and gives us a wave. "Boys."

Dray springs past me and up the porch in three lanky strides, wrapping Wyatt up like it's been a year instead of a month, then snapping off a slick twisty custom dap, because Dray has a custom dap with everyone and the motherfucking mailman.

"Wyatt, bru, look at this place," he says, rubbing his hand along the organic coral railing, mottled purple like the rest of the reefhouse, everything grown from some big name designer geneprint because Wyatt's parents only ever snag the chicest. Dray wraps his hand around the back of Wyatt's neck and sticks foreheads with him. "We are going to bang some bitches here, bru."

Wyatt mirrorgrins, catching my eye in a way that makes me not think about bitches, but more about the last time me and him sparked up on his mom's ponic and fooled around in his room with the beats up.

"Yo," Dray says, going serious. "You got scars?"

Wyatt wriggles away then, muttering like no, no it was all nano, of course there's no scarring.

By this time I'm up the rippled steps and acting fully glacial even though it's good to see Wyatt again, like really good. "What's doing, Y," I say, cookie cutter dap, precise half a hug, step-back. "You still remember me?"

Wyatt grins again. "It's vague and shit. But yeah."

Dray's already loped past us into the reefhouse, crowing about throwing some ball on the wall screens, about cracking the 18+ thumblock on the minibar.

Me and Wyatt follow him in, backs of our hands not quite touching.

We decide to swim while there's still sun, so the three of us grab trunks and dart off through the backdoor of the house, which shutters shut behind us, and out to the pale gray beach.

There's a rusty booth for skinspray, because the water's not so user friendly anymore, even though it's not as bad as that webdoc where they pull that pilot whale out the Pacific and its hide is all bubbling and falling off in chunks.

Wyatt strips down as pasty as ever and me and Dray bust him on it like always, like whoa, polar, and it feels like a standard scene except Wyatt doesn't go red and squirm like usual, instead just smiles this new kind of smile I can't quite lock.

Dray molds a handful of the gritty orange skin-

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EDITED

spray to his crotch while the gel is setting, so he comes out of the booth with this wobbly skinspray cock hanging off him. We splash around in the waves, dunking each other and pretending to drown to fuck with the little paddlebot lifeguard, until Dray's fake dick dissolves and the water gets chilly enough to slice under the sunshine and turn my toes all thick and cold.

Then we slosh out back to the sand and camp down, talking shit about the NBA draft and that seven-footer from Chad who doesn't want to get a nerve mesh for like, religious reasons. Then about the two girls a little ways off who are cam-chatting someone in a foreign language. They're both wearing black bikinis and one has an animated tattoo of a flowering vine slithering up and down her leg, which makes Dray pantomime humping his towel.

Wyatt is laughing and seems fully normal, even though I wikied all this shit about post-Edit malaise, how people feel like they lost their tab, but in their head, and they're patting every part of their brain trying to find it. And his mom, when she chatted me, she said that he might be sad. Might be distant.

But everything seems alright. We talk shit. We laugh. We pick skinspray off ourselves and flick it at each other.

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Eventually Dray can take the tattoo no more, and he pressgangs Wyatt and me to go mack on the girls with him. They turn out to be Finnish, holidaying for the summer, and also sisters. Both of them speak airtight English, but that doesn't stop Dray from pulling up Finnish-English babel apps so he can goof on them with some butchered phrases like "are you into four-ways" and "your smile gives me butterflies".

Normally Wyatt would just be basing him, but this time he dives right in, touching the tattoo girl's arm, winking, getting both of them to laugh. Like he's just realizing for the first time that he's tall (first on the team to slam, even though he only does it in practice) and rich (see: parents getting him Edited for his sixteenth and then setting us up in their reefhouse for the first weekend back) and handsome.

Eventually I get bored and slide off back to the water. From a distance I can tell the Finnish girls are still digging Wyatt, but the one who was giving me looks before points over to me and I hear "Your friend? What of your friend?"

Dray looks back and throws me a salute, then says, "Not his thing, yo. Pink is not his favorite color." Then explains further with some charades.

Him and Wyatt come join me a minute later with Finns in tab.

"Her sister's only fourteen, but whatever, right?" Dray says, shrugging. "Still sexy."

Somehow, nonverbally, it is cement that Wyatt gets the girl with the tat, whose name is Viivi, and Dray gets the little sister, whose name is Heli.

"Viivi's got a tight little ass on her," Wyatt says, looking at me when he says it with an edge I am

not used to hearing. "Cannot wait to plow that." He thumps my shoulder, like I'm in on it, and lies back in the sand. He stays eyes shut and smiling until his parents skype to check in on him, then he knocks us fists and heads down the beach with his tab.

For a while me and Dray talk about a Bulls-Satellites final, how brag it would be for Thon Maker to finally get a ring. Before we knew Wyatt, me and Dray were best friends. Same shitty burb, same shitty elementary, playing pick up on the big cement block behind the school with its one rusty hoop.

"His shoulders are different," Dray breaks out. "Used to slouch them when he asked a question, like, trying to suck it back in."

Dray's canny. A lot of people don't know that.

"Smiles different, sometimes," I say. "You ask what all they did?"

"No, bru. You should ask." He pauses. "If you could get Edited, what would you change? Like, if you could Edit anything you wanted."

I watch Wyatt dragging his feet in the wet surf, shoulders thrust back. I think about my cramped shitty house that he still treats like a museum, like, afraid to touch shit, peering out of the corner of his eye at the mold bloom on my ceiling and the bare wiring on the walls. I would want to make it so I didn't notice that. Or notice how his parents look at me sideways sometimes, or how he talks so different with his rich boys.

"I'd be funny," Dray says. "Like, really funny. Really sharp. Always say the smart thing. That'd be brag."

"You are funny, shithead."

"But, like, really funny," Dray insists. "What would you get?"

"Nothing, bru," I say, tucking my hands under my head. "Don't be fucking with perfection."

We go back to the reefhouse once Wyatt's done his skype. Then we dig the other Coronas out of the fridge, which is one of those sexy gel fridges where the stuff hangs suspended in little air bubbles, and fire up the hot tub.

The scaldy hot water and the glacial beer do their tingly headrush thing, and the steam cloud makes it feel easier to ask questions. When Dray slops over the side to go piss off the porch, I do.

"What all did they change when they went in there, Y?" I say, tapping my temple.

Wyatt's head lolls back on the edge. "Just a basic Edit, mostly," he says. "Chemo plug for anti-anxiety. Some body language modulation. Bigger memory retention, better spatial reasoning." He goes quiet for a second. "And I don't feel things as hard. Like, the shitty things. Bad memories. I remember feeling bad, but I don't feel bad remembering. Yeah?"

Our legs brush together under the water, hairs all swirling up on each other.

"And the good ones?" I say.

"Success, boys," Dray announces, back with a shit-eating grin and a frosty bottle of Jager. "Thought I was going to have to go chop someone's thumb off." Wyatt shifts over to make room, and he ends up between us.

Dray throws his chats with the Finnish girls up on the wallscreen, so we all get to witness the slow erosion of their plan to sneak out and meet us. By this time we are all tranqed enough to not care, not that I ever did.

"Still a brag first night," Wyatt says. "Like old times, yeah?"

"Brag," Dray says. "I'm going to have a place like this when I'm rich, yo. And I'll fly them Finns over on sub-orbital."

Wyatt does that new smile again, and I lock down the word for it. Permissive. It rubs me so wrong I take two chugs in a row to get the flow back.

It works: soon we're all laughing, all blurred, and it feels almost like we're drinking for the first time again. I remember Wyatt slipped his parents some bullshit about a midnight pick-up game and instead we all got pulped at this party, and Wyatt finally admitted he never invited us over after ball because he was ashamed of his big swanky house, and I almost hit him, but by the end of the night we were all level.

That's when I started liking him, not just for setting screens tight but also for his slow-mo straight face jokes and the way he flopped his arm around me to slur secrets. I slurred some back, and in a week it got so my hands had a particular zone on his hipbones and kissing him was easy. When my sister got fucked up bad on pills and had to go to emerg, for some reason I

told Wyatt first. He came over still digging the crusts out of his eyes.

Dray flicks out, sliding down the side of the tub, mumbling about learning Finnish, not to impress nobody but because it's a brag-sounding language. We get him nested on the couch with a bunch of fluffy white towels and turn him on his side, because Dray has been known to up his guts when Jager is in play.

"Dart to the beach again?" Wyatt says.

I feel a little bad leaving Dray, but I'm drunk, so only a little. We pull on some clothes and stagger on out, still dripping. The beach looks good at night, with the tide coming in soft and foamy and smoothing big arcs in the sand. The moon is nearly full, circled up by these jagged-looking clouds.

We plow some seats in the sand, which still feels warm, and watch the buoys at the edge of the swimming area bloom on one by one, bright yellow. The lifeguard is still paddling back and forth, making ripples in the water.

"I missed you," I finally say, because the week in hospital and the three in neural recovery almost did feel like a year.

"I missed you too," Wyatt says, and then we're kissing, his dry lips on my lips and my hand on his hip. It doesn't feel right. When my tongue touches his lips he shivers, not a sexy shiver, but a shiver like he just touched something dead.

He pulls away.

"Sorry, bru," he says. "Thought maybe I could. Can't." He puts a finger to his skull, where there is no scarring because they did it all with nano, and I get it now why Dray's body was always between ours.

"They did that too?" I ask dumbly.

"My parents thought it would be better," he says. "Simpler. Sorry."

"They knew about you and me?" I say.

He shakes his head, and that makes it worse, because it means he didn't tell them. "Nothing like that," he says. "It's just simpler, this way. You know, for later in life. Always liked girls more anyway, yeah?"

There's this new thing swelling big and inky in the space between us, black and bitter so I can almost taste it.

"Oh, yeah," I say. "Good call. Way simpler. Simpler the better. Your rich boy life is way complicated."

"I didn't know if it would take, or whatever," Wyatt says. "I thought maybe—"

"That's why me and Dray are your boys, right?" I say. "We keep it so simple. Couple clowns from the lowburb to make you happy. Help you remember how good you got it." I'm almost spitting the words. "That's what this weekend is, right? Therapy. To get you out of whatever post-surgery funk your mom fucking chatted me about."

"She what?" For the first time, Wyatt flushes like he used to, goes blotchy red. "I had to beg them to let me do the weekend with you. Fucking beg. They wanted me in SAT-prep." Then the flush is gone again, quicker than should be possible, and he gives his new smile. "We're still friends, bru. Right?"

I can't make him mad anymore, or hard, or anything else. But I wonder now if I ever did. If this is Wyatt with something broken, or if this is Wyatt pure, like, Wyatt with the paint stripped. If Wyatt was sad after surgery because they Edited me out, or if it was just chemicals getting level in his head.

"Sorry," Wyatt says again. "Didn't think you'd care so much." He grabs my hand and weaves the fingers tight. I look at his bony white knuckles on my brown ones and wonder how different you have to be before you're a different person.

"I don't have some swanky surgeon to just turn that shit off when it's not simple," I say. "I don't get to turn none of it off."

We sit there in the sand, and I can almost hear the countdown ticking through his head. Like, this many minutes to still be a good person, this many to still be a good friend.

I don't wait for zero. I take my hand back and get up, brush off. I go back up the beach, watching the clouds eat the moon, Edit it right out of the sky like it never was there, not really.

Rich Larson was born in West Africa, has studied in Rhode Island and Edmonton, Alberta, and at 23 now works in a small Spanish town outside Seville. He won the 2014 Dell Award and the 2012 Rannu Prize for Writers of Speculative Fiction. This is his second story for *Interzone* and we have a third appearing soon. Visit him online at richwlarson.tumblr.com.

JAMES WHITE AWARD WINNER

The James White Award is a short story competition open to non-professional writers and is decided by an international panel of judges made up of professional authors and editors. Previous winners have gone on to either win other awards or get published regularly, which is exactly why the award was set up. The winning story receives a cash prize, a handsome trophy and publication in *Interzone*. Entries are received from all over the world, and a shortlist is drawn up for the judges. To learn more about the Award itself visit jameswhiteaward.com.

This year's judges were Stephanie Saulter, Dave Hutchinson and Gareth L. Powell. The winner of the £200 first prize was 'Midnight Funk Association' by Mack Leonard.

The 2016 James White Award is now open. Entry is free.

The James White Award was instituted to honour the memory of one of Ireland's most successful science fiction authors, James White. To learn more about James White and his writing visit www.sectorgeneral.com.

H

is first mistake, thought Bunchess Taylor, was hiring the white boy. There had been a time when Bunchess would have taken issue with anyone who presumed to contribute a note to one of his sets. But now he was resident producer at Midnight Funk Association, dropping sets Tuesday through Thursday, and the job had become a little repetitive. So he outsourced the creation of new sounds to the white boy and spent the rest of his time pumping iron and drinking. The only drawback was that he had to spend time in the white boy's condo, which was packed with all the high-end audio equipment Bunchess had ever wanted but could never afford.

MACK LEONARD

MIDNIGHT FUNK ASSOCIATION

"New piece of kit came in the mail," the white boy said, stepping gingerly through the confusion of wires on the floor. "Morphion 3000. Ever heard of it?"

"Brother, I just call them all decks," Bunchess said.

"First saw it at Jesse Boykin's house, wanted one ever since. Tough unit to find. Less than twenty produced, by the ambient master Morphion. Ever heard him?"

"What did he play?"

"Meditative ambient. A lot of birdsong. Some visionary spoken word."

Bunchess was motionless. "Can't say."

"He was an ambient master. For real," the white boy said. "I finally picked up one of his decks on eBay. Mint condition, or so the seller claimed. Cost me about as much as a new studio. You can imagine my reaction when it didn't work."

Bunchess made a dismissive gesture. "A lot of hype on the Internet."

"But then, get this, I realized it was working better than I could have imagined," the white boy said. "See, Morphion specialized in distilling what he called 'pure tones' from ambient sounds he collected in his field recordings. The Morphion 3000 was his attempt to hardwire that process into a machine. All you have to do is

attach a microphone, and the unit will automatically produce a pure tone from the sounds of the environment. Like this."

He handed Bunchess a pair of headphones. It was an expensive pair; Bunchess was envious of the kid for owning them. When he put them on, the room seemed to become eerily quiet. The white boy pressed a button on the Morphion deck.

Sometimes a sound strongly correlated with a color in Bunchess's mind. The sound that came through the headphones now he visualized as the color of a black light. The white boy pressed the button a second time and the image went dark.

"That's it," the white boy said. "That's what has been ruining Detroit techno."

Bunchess removed the headphones and slouched deeper into the couch.

"We've both been saying it," the white boy said. "The new releases sound like shit. They've lost the confidence they used to have. They've lost the midnight funk. That signal is the reason why. It's interfering with our gear. Turning all our music into noise."

Bunchess rose from the sofa and walked to the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator and searched for alcoholic beverages. There was an open bottle of wine in the refrigerator door. He examined it, replaced it, and returned to the common area. The white boy was queuing up a piece of music on his MacBook.

"Peace," Bunchess said.

"No, wait." The boy shoved the headphones into his hands. "As someone who is personally invested in the livelihood of Detroit techno, you need to hear this."

Bunchess looked at the door. His thirst was strong. He inhaled and exhaled and put on the headphones. Instantly he recognized the music. "These are my beats."

"Anything different about them?"

Bunchess felt a spike of anxiety, which converted rapidly to anger. He didn't like being quizzed. He didn't like hearing his own work. It always sounded like shit. He was about to have words with the white boy when he did hear it, way in the back: the sound of a black light.

"You fucked with my beats?" said Bunchess.

"The music is exactly as you composed it," the white boy said.

"Bullshit," said Bunchess. He turned the laptop to face him and brought up the screen that displayed the various elements of the mix. It was as he remembered it: there was no sign of the black light sound. "Fucked up headphones," he said.

"Try another pair," said the white boy. "It has nothing to do with the headphones. It's in the song. It's in all of the music composed in this city."

Bunchess removed the headphones and stared at the white boy.

"I've checked every song I know of," the kid said. "From downtown out to Belleville. Amateur or professional. Vinyl, FLAC, CD. It's always there. The exact same noise."

"We've got ringing in our ears," said Bunchess.

"Our ears are fine," the white boy said. "The sound is in the atmosphere."

Bunchess looked around the condo. The mess on the floor, he realized, was not the creation of a mentally healthy person. He put on his jacket.

"Got some advice for you," he said. "Take a break from the synth music. That shit won't take you to the eighth dimension. Look at Jesse Boykin. All it took him was to the funny farm. You've been warned, all right? You're close to rubbing your shit on the walls."

The white boy shook his head. "You're going to hear it everywhere now."

That night Bunchess took the Hennessy out of the freezer and began taking shots. There was nothing good on television, so he moved to his laptop and looked up cars he wanted to buy. He enjoyed car websites where he could "design" his own car, choosing its paint color, wheel style, and type of upholstery, among other options. He designed a Range Rover, a Mercedes-Benz G-Class, and a Cadillac Escalade. None of them were even close to his price range.

When he was bored with car websites, he switched to looking up sneakers he wanted to buy. His opinions on sneakers varied dramatically. One week he would obsess over a new pair of Lebrons and the next week he would scoff at anyone not wearing Timberlands. Only one

opinion remained constant: his Grail Sneaker was the 1992 Air Jordan Bordeaux. He would do anything for a pair of those shoes in size eleven, mint condition. In his bedroom closet was a pair of Bordeaux Jordans from the 2011 re-release, but even those he did not wear, out of reverence.

When he lost interest in sneaker websites, he began playing electronic music on the website Soundcloud. And there it was, in the furthest sonic reaches of the music: the sound of the black light. It was an uncomfortable realization; Bunchess felt his heart rate increase and the vessels in his eyes bulge with blood. This was a song he had listened to on countless prior occasions. The producer had been an old friend, though he had moved away years ago, as so many others had done. Bunchess could not explain the presence of the sound.

He returned to the sofa and loaded his bong. Sometimes smoking weed brought new sounds to the forefront of a song. A comprehensive sonic analysis of any song necessarily included at least one bong rip. Bunchess took five bong rips, coughing painfully between them.

The sound was still there.

After frantically searching for what seemed like hours, thinking that he had become wretchedly disorganized and that his life was a mess, Bunchess found his lighter on the coffee table and went onto the front porch to smoke a cigarette.

That kid is fucking right, thought Bunchess as he smoked. There used to be something else about the music in this town. It used to have a different attitude. It used to have funk. And now everything was going to the dogs.

The next day was Shoulder and Back Day at the gym. Bunchess huffed through an hour on the treadmill and then moved on to the free weights. He had good DNA for lifting. He had made noticeable gains since delegating much of his workload to the white boy. When he finished his workout, he went home and began making a protein shake. He was scooping creatine powder into a blender bottle when his phone vibrated on the counter.

"Fuck you want," he said.

"I've made a breakthrough."

"It better not be birdsong."

"About that freaky signal, man."

"Fucking hell," Bunchess said, pinching the phone between his ear and his shoulder as he shook the blender bottle. "I'm warning you, stop wasting my time with that bullshit."

The white boy nonetheless proceeded to explain that he had been driving the Morphion deck around the city all morning, trying to get a sense of where the signal was strongest. "And, get this, I think I've isolated the transmission point."

Bunchess ended the call and began scrambling eggs. He forced himself to eat a banana while the eggs cooked. The boy arrived when he was scraping his plate clean.

"Let's go," the white boy said.

"Where?"

"To tell whoever's sending that signal to shut the fuck up."

"No one is sending a signal," Bunchess said. He dropped his plate in the sink and went to his room to take a shower. When he came back, the white boy was at his computer. An old song that Bunchess had composed was playing on the computer speakers. The black light sound could be heard distinctly; a sound that could not be unheard.

"Okay," Bunchess said. "Let's go."

The kid drove them to Warren, a suburb of Detroit. If Bunchess had known they were going to Warren, he would not have come. Warren was not to his liking.

The white boy pulled up alongside a chain link fence that ran for a block. The fence was topped with razor wire.

"Look at that," the white boy said.

In the middle distance stood a vertical fixture, technical steel, five stories high, with an elaborate crown of electronic apparatus.

"What is that," Bunchess said.

"Some kind of wireless transceiver," said the white boy. "Maybe."

They drove to the front gate of the complex. There were no signs or personnel, only a kiosk resembling an ATM. It was fortunate that the white boy was driving because Bunchess had little patience for unfamiliar electronic interfaces.

"I already talked to them on the phone," said the white boy.

"Then why am I here?"

"To show that we mean business."

The gate opened and they followed signs around a low gray building and some verdant landscaping to an outdoor parking lot. They were met by a security guard in a bright blue polo. He led them down a covered pathway and through a set of sliding glass doors.

The lobby had bad wall art and a lot of vinyl palms. It reminded Bunchess of the genre of electronic music known as "vaporwave", with which he had experimented before determining that it was a domain of white people.

"These two have the appointment with the Technical Director," said the security guard.

The white boy began speaking with the receptionist. Behind them was a maze of cubicles under rows of fluorescent lights. Employees in bright blue polos occupied the cubicles. Some of them were leaning back in their chairs to see who had arrived; others were peering over the partitions. Most of them were white and overweight. It was clear from their expressions that men who looked like Bunchess Taylor seldom visited this lobby.

"I'll be in the parking lot," Bunchess told the white boy.

"Hold on," the white boy said.

Bunchess exited the sliding doors. He put his hands in his pockets and walked the covered paths that ran between the buildings. A fountain gurgled in a chilly plaza. A man in a uniform inserted yellow envelopes into postal slots.

Bunchess returned to the parking lot. The security guard who had led them inside was standing next to a garbage receptacle. Bunchess got his attention.

"This place got a name?" he asked.

"Spectro," said the guard.

"That right? What kind of business does it do?"

"Wireless networks. For big companies."

Bunchess took a pack of Kools from his jacket pocket.

"There's no smoking," said the guard.

This was the last thing Bunchess expected to hear. He stared in shock at the security guard. His name tag read: ALFONZ.

"I'm outside," Bunchess said.

"It don't matter. This is a smoke-free property. You want to smoke, you got to do it in the vacant lot," said Alfonz, nodding through the chain link fence.

Bunchess looked at the vacant lot. It was thick with weeds the size of trees. The ground was scattered with grocery bags and other empties.

"Fuck that," Bunchess said.

"Sorry, brother," said Alfonz. "That's the way it is."

"You serious?"

"I am."

"You know what? They got you people on a short motherfucking leash," Bunchess said. He put away the Kools and withdrew a Sausage McMuffin he had bought on the drive over. "They let you eat breakfast biscuits over here? Or only in the vacant lot?"

"I said no smoking," the security guard said. "I didn't say no biscuits."

Bunchess bit off half of the sandwich in a single bite. He chewed twice and swallowed.

"So what you do," said Alfonz.

"Drop beats."

"You rap?"

"Techno," said Bunchess, chewing the second half of the sandwich.

"What, like at a club or some shit?" He did not wait for a reply. "What I meant was, what do you do during the day?"

Bunchess swallowed heavily. "Whatever the fuck I feel like doing."

"You don't got no day job?"

"That's what I said."

"You just drop beats?" Alfonz scowled but then laughed. "Damn, dawg. So you must be the real shit." There was no reply. "That work get you a lot of pussy?"

Bunchess balled up the wax paper and wiped his hands. "There's pussy."

"So you out getting pussy at the clubs while I'm freezing my sack off in the parking lot," Alfonz said. "Explain that one."

Bunchess said nothing.

"I bet your job don't pay your phone bill, though," said Alfonz. He unclipped a smartphone from his belt. "Check this out. Company-issue. You can't buy this shit in stores. Octa-core processor. Forty megapixel camera. Badass encryption. And they even throw in the case." He

held out the phone as if Bunchess would eagerly snatch it and seemed disappointed when he did not. "What you carrying? Let me guess: iPhone 6 Plus."

Bunchess threw the sandwich wrapper in the garbage receptacle and began walking toward the gate.

"You heading for the vacant lot?" said Alfonz.

"No," Bunchess said. "The bus stop."

Bunchess had been in the mood for ambient music lately. Years ago, he had been in the audience of a rave that had kept thumping straight into dawn. As the sun rose, the music transitioned smoothly into ambient. Bunchess was coming down from hard drugs and the ambient music was the perfect assurance of peace after the terrors of a psychedelic trip. He could not remember a better morning.

Now he was working on an ambient set that he hoped would give a new audience a similar experience. It contained works of artists he respected as well as original works. The white boy had been helping him understand some of the peculiarities of ambient music. Bunchess went to his place that evening to continue their collaboration.

"They were pretty chill about it. The people at Spectro," the white boy said. "Apparently they weren't transmitting on that frequency intentionally. It was just a bad setting. They thanked me for bringing it to their attention and changed it immediately."

"Guess you can get back to doing your job then," said Bunchess.

The white boy lowered the brightness on the screen of his MacBook. "You know what else they said? That I could have a job with them any time I liked."

Bunchess continued breaking up a nugget of weed on the coffee table.

"They said that if no one at their firm discovered the mistake before me, then I deserved to be promoted over them." He turned around to face Bunchess. "But don't worry. I won't be putting in my two weeks any time soon."

Bunchess loaded the weed into a pipe. "Do what you like," he said.

They began listening to their work-in-progress.

"You made changes," Bunchess said.

"It rose before, it glided, but it didn't pierce," the white boy said. "Now it pierces."

The smoke dispersed into a uniform haze. Bunchess remembered the alienated expressions of the office workers when they had seen him in the lobby. He remembered how smoothly the white boy had interacted with the receptionist.

"You should take that job," Bunchess said.

The white boy shook his head.

"I'm here because I blow at everything except making Detroit techno. And I blow at that too most of the time," Bunchess said. "If I knew what the fuck a wireless network was, I would probably work at Spectro instead. What's your excuse?"

"Those people fucked up literally years of electronic music."

"Not the worst atrocity to happen lately."

"My only business with Spectro," the white boy said, "will be getting some bolt cutters, breaking into their property at night, and smashing the shit out of their transmitter."

Bunchess shook his head. "Big tough criminal."

"I'm never doing a job that isn't making electronic music."

Bunchess rose from the sofa and went to the kitchen. He found a Styrofoam container in the refrigerator. Inside was the remainder of a salad from a restaurant. He considered eating it but wasn't in the mood for vegetables. In the freezer he found a box of meatloaf. He put it in the microwave without reading the instructions, estimating the cooking time based on the amount of frost under the plastic cover. He returned to the common area.

"Then move to Berlin," he said.

At 10:37 that night Bunchess took two capsules of generic Adderall and drove from his house to Midnight Funk Association. The songs he played were Detroit techno. He could no longer hear the black light sound. He was not sure whether the company had modulated its transmission frequency or the black light sound had been an aural illusion or hallucination all along. Either way, the music was fresh, and Bunchess approved.

By the time he arrived at the club, he had at

his fingertips an unlimited ability to manipulate sound. He knew that he could not play the set as he had arranged it. The ideas he had incorporated while sober were dull. Now he was surging with confidence and insight. He began playing an automated playlist to buy himself time to make revisions.

The set came together in a storm of creative inspiration. The ideas that had been eluding him came in torrents. The music fueled Bunchess and he fueled the music. He decided to include some of his own, unreleased material, despite it being mostly fragmentary. He would simply apply his vast improvisatory genius to disguising the loose ends.

The Tuesday night crowd thickened considerably as the set went on. Soon the dance floor raged at an intensity only otherwise seen on a Friday or Saturday night. Bunchess was unsurprised: to him this was the natural, unavoidable outcome of a powerful set.

He left the stage when the Adderall trip entered its late, easygoing stage, which was accompanied by the desperate urge to smoke a cigarette. In the stark cold outside he realized his clothes were soaked in sweat. He also realized that it was after 4 a.m. The manager had let him play through the closing time of the club.

Bunchess called the white boy. He wanted to discuss the possibility that the removal of the black light signal had enabled a resurgence of the old midnight funk. He also wanted to scold him for missing a historic demonstration of musical technique. The call went to voicemail.

He did not leave a message. Bunchess never left a message.

The white boy neither called nor answered his phone for seven days. Bunchess denied a creative dependency of any kind but decided to seek out the boy in the capacity of a responsible mentor. He was waiting for the elevator in the garage of the white boy's building when the doors slid open on a man in a bright blue polo.

"If it ain't the Biscuit Man," Alfonz said. "Your boy already moved."

Bunchess stared. "The fuck you talking about, moved?"

"Moved out to headquarters," Alfonz said. "Got himself a dream job paying big fat bucks. Flew out right away, no time to pack. I'm in charge of shipping his stuff." He pushed a dolly loaded with moving boxes over the threshold. "My bet, it was the phone that swung him. Hard to say no to that weapon." He laughed.

Bunchess entered the elevator and pressed the number of the boy's floor. He found the door of his unit ajar. Inside were two men in bright blue polos, surrounded by moving boxes. One was operating a tape gun; the other was applying labels. The audio gear that had once covered the floor had left distinctive impressions on the carpet.

The next two weeks were hard on Bunchess. He did not feel or, at least, acknowledge feeling, any sadness or loneliness about the white boy leaving, but he was irritated by the abrupt disintegration of his musical supply chain. His Adderall intake doubled as he struggled to create new sounds within the limited range of his laptop synthesizer software. The euphoria that had infected his Tuesday night set three weeks earlier was gone. Whatever change had allowed it to exist had ceased; the world had reverted to its prior desolation.

On Wednesday night he played one of the worst sets of his career. He listened in disbelief – how could he have thought these sounds were cool? It was humiliating, standing behind his synth rack on stage, nodding his head over an empty dance floor.

The combination of Adderall and anxiety prevented him from sleeping that night. As soon as the sun was up, he went to see Gordon, the manager of the club.

"Just wanted to give you a heads up about something," Bunchess said. "So you have time to put your ear to the ground and find somebody with talent to replace me."

"You better be shitting me," Gordon said.

"I'm not," said Bunchess.

Gordon lived in a dingy third floor apartment overlooking a drained pool; they were leaning on the balcony railing, smoking cigarettes.

"Is it the hours?" Gordon said.

Bunchess shook his head. "I don't know what

it is, brother."

"You're gonna have to do better than that."

Bunchess took a tight drag and exhaled quickly. "My sets are dogshit."

"I've seen people dancing."

"That don't matter," said Bunchess. "Those people are on so many drugs, you could put a boombox on a stool and they'd lose their shit to that."

"You're just now realizing there are drugs in electronic music?"

"Man, I don't know," Bunchess said. He flicked the cigarette. There was a thick layer of cigarette butts in the deep end of the pool. "I don't know why I thought being a DJ would be such a great job. I was stupid when I was younger. I should of gone to college." He paused. "Should of gone to high school, for that matter."

"Jesus Christ," Gordon muttered, shaking his head. "How old are you?"

"Thirty-three," said Bunchess.

"You're talking like a forty-eight-year-old. You know how old I am?"

"Forty-eight?"

"That's right," said Gordon. "So shut the fuck up."

Bunchess dislodged an orb of phlegm from his throat and hocked it into the pool.

"What about that set you were putting together with the white boy?" Gordon said. "Weren't you two working on some artsy-fartsy ambient shit?"

"The white boy's gone," Bunchess said. "Moved away."

Gordon stood up. "When the fuck did this happen?"

"Two weeks back."

"Are you fucking with me?"

"Why do you give a shit?"

"That kid was good," Gordon said. "I wanted him on my label."

"Nothing can save your label," Bunchess said.

Gordon went back to leaning on the railing. He was silent for a time. His cigarette burned down to the butt. "Any chance of him coming back by Saturday night?"

"Was that when he was scheduled to blow you?"

"That was when he was scheduled to play a fucking set."

Bunchess stared. "Say what?"

Gordon took out his phone and began composing a text.

"What did you say?" Bunchess said.

"I told him he could open," Gordon said, distracted. "He was all excited about it. Never crossed my mind that he'd bitch out."

"How come nobody said anything about this to me?"

"He thought you were going to whoop his ass," Gordon said, still texting. "For holding out on the good material or some shit. I don't know. Stupid fucking kid."

"I wouldn't have whooped his ass," Bunchess said.

"I know."

They did not speak as Gordon typed. A tenant on the ground floor left his apartment and walked to the parking lot. He was wearing the clothes of a construction worker.

"The kid was smart, he got a real job," Bunchess said.

"The kid was a pussy," Gordon said. He put down his phone, yawned, and rubbed his face. "What are you doing after this?"

Bunchess flexed and slapped his bicep. "Getting stacked. Why?"

"Need an excuse to get fucked up."

"Then turn on the TV."

It was Leg Day at the gym. Bunchess huffed through thirty minutes on the treadmill, then moved on to leg extensions. Early in his second set, his knees began to ache. They had been aching in the gym for nearly a year. Lately they had been aching outside of the gym. They would ache for the rest of his life. There was nothing he could do about it.

He moved on to squats. He adjusted the squat rack to match his height. He loaded three plates on each side of the bar. He chalked his hands and strapped on his gloves. He lifted the bar away from the rack. He bent at the knees and inhaled.

At the climax of the repetition, Bunchess had a realization. The white boy hadn't moved out to headquarters. The white boy had years before disillusionment sunk in. He had only just left college. He had an ambient set and a stage at Midnight Funk Association. He had just been

entering the quality years.

Bunchess racked the bar. Sweat was dripping from his chin. The black light sound was ringing in his ears. He dropped his towel and walked out of the gym.

"I need your Morpheus 1000," Bunchess said to Jesse Boykin.

"Say what?"

Bunchess was standing at the threshold of Jesse Boykin's house. There was a pair of soiled briefs in the gravel. The sky was mute gray.

"One of your decks," Bunchess said. "Your Morpheus 1000. Some shit like that."

"Morphion 3000?"

"Whatever the fuck. Bring it out."

"That's a rare piece of kit, man," said Jesse Boykin. "Collectible."

"Then go collect that shit!" Bunchess shouted.

"Aah." Jesse Boykin scowled but let him in. The hall was dark, cramped; it reeked of cigarettes, unwashed dishes, old trash. "What the fuck you doing, coming around here all hopped up and shit? Like you gonna do somebody in?"

"Just making clear how serious I am about getting that deck," Bunchess said.

He sat in the living room, drinking beer and watching game shows, until Jesse Boykin came back with the Morphion 3000.

"Don't know what you're planning to do with that piece of crap," he said, clearing a spot among the beer and liquor bottles standing like an urban skyline on the coffee table. "Hasn't worked in years. Fucks up anything you try to run through it."

"Got a question for you about that," Bunchess said, leaning forward in his rocking chair. "You ever feel like our whole scene, you know, the Detroit scene, there's been something off about it the past few years? Something missing?"

"Just the past few years?"

"Serious question."

Jesse Boykin took a sip of beer. "Yeah," he said. "I do feel like that."

"A lot of people have been saying shit like that, haven't they?"

"Yes they have."

Bunchess inched further forward in his seat. "Why do you think that is, Jesse?"

Jesse Boykin shifted in his seat and looked at the TV. "I can't say, brother."

"Come on, you've got to have some theory."

Jesse Boykin kept watching the TV. He looked unhappy and uncomfortable, Bunchess thought. Unhappy and uncomfortable and old.

"I'm not the right person to ask," he said.

"Let me run a theory by you," Bunchess said. "Say there was a signal. Like…a bad fucking signal. Broadcast through the entire city. Affecting everybody. Do you think a signal like that could explain how shitty things have been around here lately?"

Jesse Boykin turned and stared hard at him for a long time.

"There ain't no fucking signal," he said sharply.

"Why you say that?"

"Because if there was a signal, there would be an off-switch," Jesse Boykin said. "And what's happening in this city, it ain't got no motherfucking off-switch."

He picked up the remote control and unmuted the TV. Bunchess sat quietly in the darkness of the foul-smelling room, finishing his beer, the glare of the television on his sweaty face.

Night was falling as Bunchess crossed the vacant lot to the fence around the Spectro property. He was carrying bolt cutters. There was no discernible activity on the other side of the fence. Bunchess began cutting the wires. He had made nearly half of the cuts he needed to gain entry when he was blinded by the beam of a MagLite.

"Stop right there! Police are on their way!"

Bunchess lowered the bolt cutters. "You ready to move out to headquarters, Alfonz?"

The beam moved aside and a dark figure on the other side of the fence stepped forward. "The techno dude? What the fuck you doing here?"

"I won't be easy," Bunchess said.

"Say what?"

"Not like the white boy was."

"Listen up, brother – I don't know if you're drunk or high or what," said Alfonz, "but if you want to stay out of jail, you better run. The police are on their way."

"This is Detroit. You can call the police. But that don't mean they're coming."

"They come in this neighborhood," Alfonz said.

Bunchess gripped the bolt cutters. He could not exist in Detroit, his city, as long as the sound of the black light was poisoning the airwaves. But there was a fence between him and the tower, and the fence was too high. Its razors were too sharp. It was too well guarded. He didn't have the power to cut through it.

"Call the Technical Director," Bunchess said.

"Say what?"

"You heard me," Bunchess said. "Use that super phone of yours to call the Technical Director. Tell him he has a message from Bunchess Taylor."

"Leave it with the responding officers," said Alfonz.

"The message is this," Bunchess said. "I got a deck. A rare piece of kit. Collectible. Just like the white boy had."

"I told you, your boy don't even live here no more."

"I know, I know," said Bunchess. "But you just pass that on to your Technical Director. Bunchess Taylor, resident producer at Midnight Funk Association, has a pimp-ass deck. Just like the one the white boy had. You hear what I said?"

"All I heard was bullshit."

"And he's big," Bunchess said. "Say that too. He's big and he knows we're coming. He presents a credible threat. Make sure you tell that to the Technical Director."

"Brother, I didn't hear a word that you just said."

"And you know what, Alfonz? I hope they send you. I really do."

Bunchess turned and walked across the vacant lot, weeds snagging on his jeans. He jaywalked at the intersection and returned to his parked car. He put the bolt cutters in the trunk. As he drove away, he played a song that he had listened to when he was young, 'Hot Box' by The Preps. Hearing it made him feel powerful again. When he got home, he decided, he would take his Bordeaux Jordans out the closet. The time had come to wear them.

Mack Leonard is a young writer who lives in the United States and listens to a lot of electronic music.

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THE AGE OF ADALINE

SPRING

A GIRL WALKS HOME ALONE AT NIGHT

Like a good apex predator, nobody saw the **JURASSIC WORLD** phenomenon coming till it struck. Universal had been showing quiet confidence in its property, despite Colin Trevorrow's steep promotion from a Duplass brothers indie to the cloning of an extinct monster from recovered franchise DNA; but even the studio didn't have *Jurassic World* pegged as the *Avengers*-killing, record-stomping behemoth that's now broken right out of its paddock and eaten up rival attractions for sport. Yet the film has some very Spielbergian things to say about why the director of *Safety Not Guaranteed* was the right man to go back in time with, and what it takes to be an alpha in today's Hollywood, with a lot – probably a little too much – of wry metafilmic reflection on franchise

management in a Jurassic world of monster-on-monster action, where primeval lizard-brained colossi battle it out to rule the planet. Some dialogue excerpts from the suits: "While year-over-year revenue continues to climb, operating costs are higher than ever. Our shareholders have been patient, but let's be honest: no-one is impressed by a dinosaur anymore. Twenty years ago, de-extinction was right up there with magic; these days, kids look at a stegasaurus like an elephant from the city zoo … Consumers want them bigger, louder, more teeth." And: "The park needs a new attraction every few years in order to reinvigorate the public's interest – kind of like the space program." Or, more forcefully, from Vincent D'Onofrio's scheming militariser: "Every living thing in this jungle is trying to murder the other: mother nature's way of testing her creations, refining the pecking order." Needless to say, the hero and moral centre is the one who understands that blockbuster rex is a living animal, not a commodity: a film-whisperer who can wrangle targeted teamwork from a pack of birdbrained predators and take down the corporate-engineered Übermonster by using nature against genetically-modified Frankenscience.

Jurassic World was created by the same process as Matt Reeves'

This prequel spinoff sees the Minions hunt to unite all quadrants, age bands, and nations in the universal language of gibberish

Dawn of the Planet of the Apes: the incoming director bins an existing script by Rick Jaffa and Amanda Silver and writes his own version from scratch with a completely different concept, only for Jaffa and Silver to claw back credit after WGA arbitration. But the Jaffa–Silver version was the end of the previous gene-line, a late rewrite of the old John Sayles plot about human-raptor teams on the mainland, and Trevorrow has binned everything but the raptor idea and gone and made a new dinosaur. With Spielberg's input and encouragement, Trevorrow and his *Safety* co-writer Derek Connolly have consigned not just fifteen years of development history but both of the dreary Isla Sorna sequels to a lost world of their own, returning the franchise instead to Isla Nubar and a fully-operational version of the original park – now under new corporate management after the late John Hammond's assets were bought up by Asian capital and exploited in all the ways he intended them not to be. Classic Spielberg tropes are expertly checked off and wrangled: a fracturing family healed from the kids upwards by a triple whammy of transcendent wonder, thrilling jeopardy, and redemptive survival and rescue, while the forces of exploitation are taught a toothy lesson by a clever girl. All the same, Joss Whedon's notorious tweet on the teaser clip as "70s-era sexist" was as ungenerous as it is spot-on. That she's a stiff and he's a life-force is exactly the plot: Chris Pratt's raptor-wrangler is confident in his primeval masculinity and alphahood, annoyingly right about everything, and impervious to any form of character growth because arcs are for girls, while Bryce Dallas Howard's Claire is insecure and conflicted in her femininity, her steely professionalism and effectiveness a barrier between her socially constructed self and her nurturing nature, and her personal journey of self-realisation and transformation involves stripping down to her vest and recognising that he was completely right all along. Really? Still?

Universal's other big franchise monster **MINIONS** is nothing if not assertive of the studio brand. It has you at the logo, by the simple device of trumping a trick from *Pitch Perfect 2* and singing Jerry Goldsmith's Universal fanfare in Minionese; while it ends with a T Rex roaring out of the screen in 3D with an ad for the Minion Madness zone at UniversalThemeParks.com. It's just a shame that the film in between is such a dismal squandering of a top-value property, after master minioneer Pierre Coffin's superb previous work engineering the little yellow nitwits as modern animation's most perfectly adapted all-ages comic creation. Cut free at last from Gru and the girls, and with them any residual responsibility to character-centred narrative, this prequel spinoff from the *Despicable Me* franchise sets the Minions loose at last to unite all quadrants, age-bands, and nations in the universal language of gibberish and slapstick – only to undergo an agonising zeppelin deflation as hilarity, sense, and point efflate in a series of disastrously misjudged narrative choices. The

film stumbles along amusingly enough for the first half hour, as a Minion-centred secret history of the world from the Jurassic to the Berezina segues into the 1968-set main plot about a hardy trio of Minion scouts seeking their new Bonaparte in Sandra Bullock's Scarlet Overkill, "the world's first female supervillain", who plans to overcompensate for her drive to be a princess by stealing the British (here, "English") crown. But at precisely the point where a 1963 Disney classic is abruptly invoked for a bizarre plot swerve, the film loses all sense of direction in sixty seconds of what the hell just happened; and the rest of the story skids around on banana boots breaking plot ideas like crockery. John Hamm's character seems only to be there for a potential double-cross that never comes, and Scarlet herself is a startlingly weak and incoherent antagonist who even takes her husband's name.

It's clearly been a challenge finding a sustained narrative centre for the Minions, who by their nature don't lend themselves easily to individualised or stakes-led models of storytelling at feature scale. For perfectly sound animation reasons, the films and spinoff shorts have actually built up quite a large cast of named individual Minions with relatively distinct looks and characterisations, including the lead trio here; but it's unlikely that even the most obsessed toddler would be able to pick Kevin, Stuart, and Bob out of a lineup, despite extensive voiceover help from Geoffrey Rush's narration for the benefit of younger viewers who haven't quite mastered the cognitive processing of showing without telling. It has to be said that the Minions themselves remain pretty bulletproof as a comic resource, not least when contributing to the sixties mixtape soundtrack; and it's hard not to be a little in awe of a film that sets out to introduce very young children to the fascination of evil and the power of human monsters to charm the innocent to their will, even if the implications play to an empty house. The closing titles spool over that Donovan song about paedophilia and vibrators, and long after everyone has left the cinema the whole cast reunite for a full-scale musical number – a Minion cover of Lennon and McCartney's 'Revolution' – to an audience of empty darkness. But come the DVD, they'll have their moment.

We're nine minutes into the film before we get to finally learn what Tomorrowland is and what happened to it in the series

Colin Trevorrow landed his *Jurassic* gig off an initial recommendation from animation superstar turned live-action spectacleer Brad Bird, whose own **TOMORROWLAND** is another thoughtful but very conflicted film about theme parks as incubators of dreams – and specifically about Walt Disney's attempts to use the medium of immersive entertainment zones to present a radically experiential futurology, first in the rather ill-fated Tomorrowland zone of Disney parks, and then (and centrally for the film) in the 1964 World's Fair and the EPCOT project in Florida that metastasised after his death into the Magic Kingdom. Co-written

with Damon Lindelof, Bird's film sends teenage NASA scion Britt Robertson down a rabbit hole of mysteries wrapped in conspiracies that lead her to George Clooney's superannuated boy genius and the search for a path back into a utopian alternate future glimpsed fifty years back but lost long since in the mists of disillusion and pessimism, while our own world ticks down on a doomsday clock that can only be reset by a resurgence of the will to dream. The most thematically ambitious blockbuster of the year, it repurposes nakedly religious imagery – the city of God seen from afar through cornfield plains of heaven – in the service of a provocative set of reflections on the history of the future, the decline of NASA and the death of technological optimism, and the waning of science fiction's power to imagine better worlds as the stubbornly dystopian real world supervenes over the synecdochic jetpacks.

Inevitably the film's provocations are more successful than the solutions proposed, both political and narrative. True to form, Lindelof protracts the mysteries and ramps up the stakes all through the second act; we're ninety minutes into the film before we get to the end of the breadcrumb trail and finally learn what Tomorrowland is and what happened to it in the sixties. That's a long time to keep the lid on the mystery box in a summer Disney tentpole, and when the answers do at last arrive they're profoundly underimagineered. In particular, and fatally for a film so heavily loaded with visual promise, the Tomorrowland we visit in early teases is (for reasons best left unspoiled) displaced by a greatly diminished version by the time we actually get there; the film's elaborate thematisation of utopian versus dystopian futures goes nowhere when it's revealed that the nature of Tomorrowland's connection to our world is considerably less interesting than implied; and the Hugh Laurie character's climactic monologue about our own world's futurological paralysis ("You dwell on this terrible future, you resign yourselves to it, but you won't do anything because that future doesn't ask anything of you today") is answered only with a handwaving assurance that if you recruit enough dreamers the future will fix itself. The messy plot riffs uneasily on *Atlas Shrugged*, but with a multitude of strange and pointless detours involving homicidal men in black, robot children with sixties Disney accents, a geek memorabilia shootout, a secret society of Verne, Tesla, and Edison and the Eiffel Tower turning out not to be a spaceship (though it clearly was in earlier drafts), and a 58-day countdown to save the world that never actually gets used. Disney have pencilled in a $140m writedown, a sad outcome for a film that has thought harder than any about what Walt might have been remembered for had his own utopian project to imagineer the world not been aborted by chainsmoking himself into an early grave – and how the science-fictional urge might yet have the power to turn theme-

park designers and animated filmmakers into the saviours of the future of us all.

The long of memory may recall that Tomorrowland was where we left the *Mad Max* franchise at the end of *Beyond Thunderdome* – that being the lost children's name for the pre-collapse city to whose ruins they escape at the climax, leaving Max Rockatansky behind in the wastelands where he's been stranded for three decades, while a new generation arises who know him only as a name on the desert wind. But here he is, recast and reborn under George Miller's own hand in **MAD MAX: FURY ROAD**, which amplifies the twenty-minute final chase sequence of previous *Mad Max* films to feature length in a two-hour rampage of apocalyptic insanity involving a mutant army pursuing a truckload of babes across half of Namibia and back again. Easily the maddest *Max* yet, it's not even really about him. Lower left/upper right diagonal credits leave it ambiguous whether Tom Hardy's Max or Charlize Theron's Furiosa is the lead, but Max finds himself spending most of the first act strapped to the front of a hurtling vehicle and much of the rest watching from the passenger seat, while Furiosa and Nicholas Hoult's aptly-named Nux get the jackals' share of the fun.

Unconventionally created as a sequence of 3500 storyboards by comics legend Brendan McCarthy, whose *2000AD* work in the eighties was itself seminally influenced by Miller's original films, it was written and designed in the language of comics long before it was handed over to a screenwriter to be dressed in a more conventionally scriptly shape, and still includes lines like "He's a crazy smeg who eats schlange" and characters with names like Rictus Erectus, Corpus Colossus, and Toast the Knowing (a girl), as well as a tanker of breastmilk and a pair of tumours with biroed-on faces called Larry and Barry. Somewhere in among the eyeball-popping vehicle stunts and gasoline-happy mayhem is a modestly resonant fable about the redefinition of humanity in an irradiated world where intact genomes are a vanishingly precious and contested commodity; but the franchise has never been terribly bothered to justify itself on any terms but its own. Even Max's flashbacks no longer match the first film, which itself was only set in the future in the first place because it was cheaper to shoot away from population centres. But it's mad to the max and, as monster resurrections go, leaves Indominus Rex looking like a rejected auditionee.

Desert warfare wears a more contemporary battledress in Monsters: Dark Continent, Tom Green's satisfyingly unconventional sequel

Apocalyptic desert warfare wears a more contemporary battledress in **MONSTERS: DARK CONTINENT**, Tom Green's satisfyingly unconventional sequel to Gareth Edwards' 2012 guerrilla-sf calling card. Like the first film, it centres on displaced Americans trapped in an infected zone overrun by probe-hopping giant cephalopods from Europa; but here the characters are a band of besties from Detroit serving together in an overseas desert war

Another determinedly low-key, genre-busting apocalypse cheapie comes in former titles man Henry Hobson's slow-burn zombie drama Maggie

where the locals don't take kindly to westerners coming in and trying to bomb the alien terror out of their homes. Apart from a pivotal set piece early on, the creatures themselves are seen mostly, like the targets of the war on terror they figure, in the distance or on the margins of the story – which centres more on the relationship between the dwindling band of brothers and the local insurgency that sees them as the real enemy. Expanding subtly on Edwards' nanobudget exobiology, it presents more of the creatures' enigmatic lifecycle and speciation – memorable sequences show the aliens not just in composited herds and the throes of death and spore release, but in illegal dogfights or as barefoot children's pets in a tin – but is just as interested in graphic scenes of goat slaughter and the performance of masculinity in an alien world which has different ideas about who are the invading abominations. At two hours, it runs long and isn't afraid of slow; as a science-fictional *Apocalypse Now* for the age of insurgency, it suffers from a lightness of narrative pull that makes it a tricky sell as genre entertainment. But though it hasn't found much of an audience in theatres, it's a bold and haunting film that deserves to linger.

Another determinedly low-key, genre-busting apocalypse cheapie comes in former titles man Henry Hobson's slow-burn zombie drama **MAGGIE**, which creates space for human resonance by positing a plague that takes weeks or months to turn its victims, and starting at the point where conventional zombie films leave off. *Maggie* comes from a famous Black List script by former NASA engineer John Scott, a rising genre star who has since reteamed with Hobson for the latest attempt to get Fox's *Caves of Steel* adaptation out of development hell, as well as scripting the adaptation of Tad Williams' *Otherland*; and his breakout spec presents itself as effectively the downbeat sequel to an unseen *World War Z*-style family thriller which has climaxed in Arnold Schwarzenegger tracking down his infected daughter Abigail Breslin, and now he brings her home for their final weeks together as she slowly turns to an undead flesh-eating monster. Originally a vehicle for the starrier but less suitable Chloe Moretz, its heavyweight and prominently against-type casting of Schwarzenegger has tilted the dramatic balance more towards the father role; but Breslin still has the best of the material, and the film is strongest when it gives her a break from the unevenly written dad stuff, particularly in a poignant second-act sequence hanging out one last time with her zombie boyfriend and as yet unbitten pals. Early scenes dangle the possibility of an eventual cure ("The CDC are being tight-lipped about a vaccine"), but the film pleasingly resists the lazy-option ending you might be fearing, even if the actual outcome falls short of the expectation of surprise. Schwarzenegger (tellingly credited here with a Drama Coach) is outplayed by his *Zombieland* veteran co-star, but still gives a satisfyingly grizzled performance

which nicely complements that other thing he's in.

Arnold's present-day successor Dwayne Johnson gets to play out his own primeval drama of a father battling to pull his daughter from the jaws of apocalypse in **SAN ANDREAS**, an uproariously deadpan homage to Roland Emmerich's fondly-remembered disaster epics, whose money sequences it delightfully emulates on a modest percentage of the budget when Paul Giamatti's CalTech lab develop a technique for predicting earthquakes and immediately spot the big one moving in on San Francisco. As in *Jurassic World*, a fracturing family on the brink of divorce is pulled back together by sustained 3D IMAX digital jeopardy, and a pair of displaced brothers are saved from a smushing by a hot single whose clothes fall off her in layers as the adventure progresses, while the corporate weasel in charge of the show meets a gleefully messy fate. Here the narrative focus is on the hero's own foundering marriage to Carla Gugino, as he has to summon all his Iraqi-vet rescue-chopper skills to pluck his womenfolk from the jaws of seismic destruction and find healing for the silent loss that is pulling his family to pieces from the inside. Like a sign that it's all a dream, Kylie Minogue wafts in and swiftly *Holy Motors* out; and the whole gigantic spectacle is almost upstaged by Alexandra Daddario's terrifying eyes, which could suck the souls out of Sauron and the Hypnotoad without the need to blink.

San Francisco is where Blake Lively passes **THE AGE OF ADALINE**, after a superheroising sequence of hypothermic anoxic reflex followed by defibrillation by lightning bolt immortalises her telomeres and leaves her forever 29, dodging detection by changing her identity every twenty years, until a slow-motion exchange of glances with Michiel Huisman across a room to soft piano chords over strings brings her fear of commitment to a crisis, as I daresay it would. A fairly terrible script and some pass-the-parcel recasting, with Adaline a handmedown role from Katherine Heigl and Natalie Portman, have left both leads rather floundering, though Ellen Burstyn gives a good replay of her *Interstellar* role and Harrison Ford is, well, in it, as an old beau dumped in the sixties who now threatens an old-enough-to-be-her-granddad revenance of Woody Allen creepiness. The film's main virtue is as a nobly conceived, if rather insipidly executed, pitch to the neglected community of mature female audiences, whose experience of ageing and the livedness of long time is quite sensitively addressed by the ingenious recourse of finding a way to cast a part for an older actress with a younger one, her arrested bodily age of 29 playing deftly to the mature audience's sense of being the same person on the inside while the world changes around them and generations pass. "I don't think I'll ever understand why so few people care about history," says Adaline,

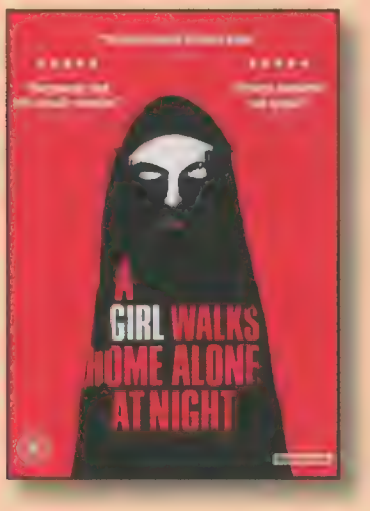
An indier, fxier, and historically more far-reaching take on the perils of romancing the immortal feminine comes in *Spring*

who works as an archivist, takes her date on historic city tours, and can beat his dad at the seventies edition of Trivial Pursuit. Tellingly, though, that's about her limit.

An indier, fxier, and historically more far-reaching take on the perils of romancing the immortal feminine comes in Justin Benson and Aaron Moorhead's **SPRING**, in which a young Californian, uprooted by bereavement and in flight from both sides of the law, fetches up in Apulia, where he falls for a hot evolutionary geneticist with an ancient secret that is revealed by sly degrees unless you make the mistake of looking at the poster beforehand. Like Adaline, but more radically, the heroine preserves her cover by avoiding connections and changing up her identity every twenty years; and like *Adaline*, her film offers a chance of lasting mortal love as an alternative to an eternity of fleeting flings. But here the stakes are higher, the history deeper (the final sequence takes us back to Pompeii and the aeons of geologic and human time still inscribed on the Vesuvian landscape), the characters more engaging, and the thoroughly indie ending eschewing a Hollywood resolution for an sf homage to *Before Sunrise*. He's a life force, she's a Great Old One. Still? Really? Cool.

More or less the exact same story is played out in a monochrome mirror in Ana Lily Amirpour's Farsi vampire romance **A GIRL WALKS HOME ALONE AT NIGHT**, which follows the entanglement of a small-time Iranian hustler with a skateboarding vampire chick in a chador, and a stolen cat that steals the film back from them both. Its setting, the fantasy Iranian petropolis of Shahre Bad ("Bad City"), is an eerie theme park of the postmodern world: an oil town frozen in a version of the 1980s and created by plastering Persian signage and graffiti over the industrial backdrops of petroleum city Taft, CA, with White Lies duelling Radio Tehran on the soundtrack and the heroine's walls displaying strange parallel-world Iranian knockoffs of eighties pop-icon posters. But actually every single thing about this wonderful film feels like a dream. Elijah Wood produced. Margaret Atwood was among the investors (on Indiegogo). The filmmaker was born in Margate. The story is built pretty much entirely from Tarantino scenes, those drawn-out moments of spaghetti-western tension where the audience know that one of three things is going to happen, but never which: something dreadful, something entirely unexpected, or (often most thrillingly) nothing at all. Nowhere is this more gloriously enacted than in the final payoff, a long penultimate shot of the three principals barely acting at all (the cat doing most of the work), while something of enormous moment happens slowly between them before a cut at the perfect moment to the perfect final shot, leaving the audience beaming stupidly with delight. It's a Jurassic world out there in the wilder west; but in the shadow suburbs there'll always be a place for clever girls.

WIN A GIRL WALKS HOME ALONE AT NIGHT ON BLU-RAY



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Ana Lily Amirpour's Farsi vampire romance A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night follows the entanglement of a small-time Iranian hustler with a skateboarding vampire chick on a chador, and a stylish art that steals the film look from them both ... every single thing about this wonderful film feels like a dream.

LASER FODDER
TONY LEE

SWORD OF VENGEANCE

VICE

TOKYO TRIBE

JONATHAN STRANGE & MR NORRELL

JUPITER ASCENDING

LAST KNIGHTS

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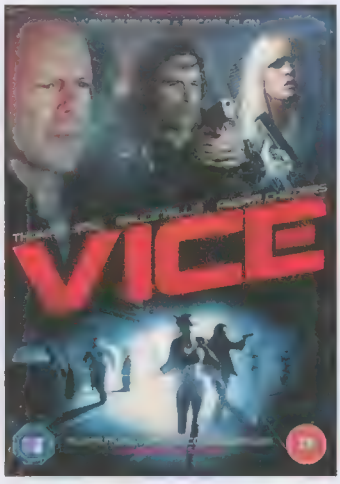
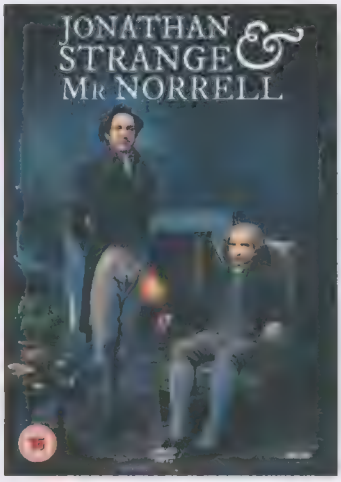


Nicolas Winding Refn's *Valhalla Rising* (*Interzone* #228) was a magnificent adventure with fantasy aspects, a movie that was rightly celebrated for its fascinating elegiac appeal and gritty violence that seems to have launched the current media fad for Viking-related things. **SWORD OF VENGEANCE** (DVD, 1 June) has no Vikings at all, but it is a preposterously over-stylised and ridiculously slow paced effort, as if director Jim Weedon studied every frame of *Valhalla Rising* and many of its imitators but failed to appreciate that striking visuals in action scenes actually mean very little if the rest of the movie neglects to engage viewers' attention with an intriguing story or a bunch of characters that are far more than blank-faced generic stereotypes.

Shot in Serbia, supposedly doubling for 12th century Britain, *Sword of Vengeance* is basically a western in medieval guise, with its mysterious nameless hero fighting innumerable baddies while never bothering to properly explain his purpose until long after we have stopped caring. The colour is washed out so often, and to such an extent, that many scenes are plainly monochrome compositions or like animated silhouettes. I am not sure if this chiaroscuro approach still has any artistic value in modern cinema. It seems so terribly old fashioned in today's world of digitally-balanced colour and sharp-focus special effects. That isn't the only problem here, though. With attention to detail just on visuals, dialogue rings hollow whenever it aims for moments of theatrical intensity (which is practically all the time) and so many words of mettle clang louder than metals in the swordfights.



Westworld meets *Surrogates* with replicants not robots in Brian A. Miller's **VICE** (Blu-ray/DVD, 8 June). Bruce Willis lords it over hedonists and psychos in his sleazy and violent playground, wherein designated victim Kelly, alias 6126 (Ambyr Childers, *We Are What We Are* remake), starts to recall her supposedly erased past, breaks out of backstage brainwashing labs, and becomes a very bad idea on the loose. Too intent upon generating (lacklustre) thrills to bother with much development of already basic android-evolution/AI concepts, *Vice* has precious little to commend it as sci-fi, even to confirmed fans of *The Machine* and *Ex Machina* (or those remembering *Galaxina*, *Eve of Destruction*, *The Stepford Wives*, etc).

"I can't get in. It's not letting me in," warns one hapless techie, as if unaware of an undercurrent of weak feminist commentary in the movie. Vaguely Luddite cowboy cop Roy (Thomas Jane, struggling to invest his stereotyped hero with character and dignity) rejects the notion of catharsis as a potential safety valve in a pressure-cooker society, so *Vice* is just another simplistic genre actioner rolling off the production line catering to midweek DVD rentals. Despite throwaway allusions to *Blade Runner*, this lacks any Scottish or phildickian sophistication. Even with slimy corporate villains, it has no rebellious cyberpunk appeal. *Gamer* was loads more fun. *Dollhouse* had vastly superior intrigue. Unashamedly, *Vice* steals its failsafe twist from *RoboCop* and never acknowledges its numerous debts.

Sion Sono, director of teen-cult shocker *Suicide Club*, supernatural horror *Exte: Hair Extensions*, and neo-noir mystery *Guilty of Romance* (*Black Static* #26), drops so far out of genre favour with **TOKYO TRIBE** (Blu-ray/DVD, 15 June) it appears unlikely he will ever get his mojo back. A hip-hop musical about street gangs, this throw-down in a live-action comic book realm of misogynistic grotesques that rule over narcissistic hooligans results in cheesy/queasy wanksta comedy that is simply a bit too ridiculous to offend. With everything from *A Clockwork Orange* and Walter Hill's *The Warriors* to *Kill Bill* and Luhrmannesque tracking-shots against backgrounds of colourful tat as touchstone references, this Japunk dance fu with manga-style fantasy fight sequences

never fully coheres from the relentlessly sleazy rhetoric of its rapropaganda. Although it aims for a goofy satire of youth culture its only 'futuristic' leisure community fixates not on radical antics of a (pointless?) rebellion against authority, but on the hideously dated (hippie-inspired?) love and peace movement!

Although vague comparisons might be made to such 1980s' retro/rock movies as the classic *Streets of Fire* and the awful *Absolute Beginners*, *Tokyo Tribe* does not match the relatively-instant cult appeal of either.

Tony reviews a lot more DVDs and Blu-rays in our sister magazine *Black Static*, often with easy to enter competitions to win some of those titles. 26 recent and forthcoming releases are covered in the current issue, including *Dream Home*, *It Follows*, *The Voices*, and *The Human Centipede 3: Final Sequence*. To take out a discounted dual subscription and have *Black Static* delivered at the same time as *Interzone* please visit ttapress.com/shop/

A TV serial of seven episodes, **JONATHAN STRANGE & MR NORRELL** (Blu-ray/DVD, 29 June) begins in Yorkshire, where a local 'society of magicians' fail to practice any magic, practical or illusory. A revival of English enchantment results in a humble but ambitious Mr Norrell – whose coming was foretold by the legendary Raven King – struggling with the social mores of London, where he is pressured into demonstrating the miracle of resurrection, enabling an entry into British politics and easy corruption by faerie-land. Marc Warren is coldly mischievous as the Gentleman of Lost-Hope. From spell-casting, scrying and tarot, the focus shifts to willpower and books, and "one is never lonely when one has a book" seems a likely bit of self-indulgence by original novelist Susanna Clarke, but the award-winning writer's reported acceptance of pastiche as a vital element of her work (too lengthy for my taste!) ensures that such asides do not make a bad impression, and rarely seem out of place in a humorous tale that, in this adaptation at least, is a lively concoction boasting considerable wit and a fascinating crossover appeal as costume drama.

As an epic origin story of a peculiarly British superhero, like some modernised, expanded account of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, this classy production is fanciful and operatic, and it mixes together subgenre elements of historical fantasy and alternative history, so that its stylised magic is grounded in conceptual realism missing from any typical

works of mythical fantasy more deeply rooted in gothic traditions. Strange and Norrell are the anti-Potter magicians of a grey area situated between imagination and rationality, in a world lacking the absolutes of good (here, just comedy and romance) or evil (there's only tragedy and betrayal), comparable in many respects to the broken truce between Dark and Light worker-shifts presented in Russian blockbusters *Night Watch* and *Day Watch*. In addition to acting as portals for otherness (like the 'Gloom' from those aforementioned Russian movies), badly silvered and antique mirrors tend to symbolise ambiguity here. Events are seen more clearly in magical water than they ever are when viewed through the looking glass. Unlike the *Constantine* movie (based on *Hellblazer* comics), the religiosity of demons and angels is notably absent. And, in particular, sin is hardly relevant to gifted amateur Strange (it is the same last name as Marvel's master of the mystic arts), who builds his enviable reputation in wars, where he's nicknamed Merlin (lite!), but the fragility of respectability is an important part of motivation for protagonists like Strange and Norrell, while mercenary attitudes guide the actions of the less wholesome stereotypes and roguish charlatans.

Unexpectedly embracing zombification (a burning windmill links the sequence to classic *Frankenstein*), while straying into the ethical domains of boffins or shrinks instead of exploring dreams, this TV show raises the game stakes for magic in serious drama. Although it could be argued that *The Dresden Files* (2007) helped to establish a fitting tone, even if its basic cop-show format and monster-of-the-week plots didn't lay the foundations or pave the way for something of this literary depth and narrative complexity. Waterloo marks a turning point for weird warfare practiced by battlefield veteran Strange, increasing to breaking strain his burden of morbid guilt, while direct experience of destructive magic clearly results in premature-grey streaks of hard-won wisdom in various hairdos.

Books and writing are an ever-present backdrop to action, so it's no surprise to see debates about state secrets and censorship in publishing, as the easily weaponised magic being offered to generals and the general public is deemed unacceptable if such power falls into the wrong hands. In Venice, Strange attempts to capture a fairy as his genie, drinking potions like Jekyll in pursuit of personal gain, so his threatened moral downfall is not simply from a position of grace. But it's just a prologue for an uprising launched after stranger Strange's return to England, from an odyssey bringing radical social change as a revolutionary almost branded traitor/terrorist. Soon, it's raining in the heart of Norrell's labyrinth-protected library, there's a hanging and a tree-centred mock-crucifixion, and all the kingdoms are in jeopardy, while the ladies rescued from strictly ballroom in faerie revels (presumably, dancing is fairy sex) seem unfazed after their long ordeals. The closure leaves open possibilities for a sequel concerning magic in the Industrial Revolution, which might well appeal strongly to fans of steampunk: 'Hex Britannica', with the enchanted empire's peaceful hegemony policing the world?

Let's hope that this is successful enough to inspire adaptations of other fantasy classics. A TV series derived from Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* comics would be welcome, and seems overdue!

Whereas *Cloud Atlas* was about stories across the vastness of time, the Wachowskis' princess movie **JUPITER ASCENDING** (Blu-ray/DVD, 29 June) is all-action with chases and battles through the depths of space. It features alien abductions, starship invasion, dragon stormtroopers, wolfish hero Caine (Channing Tatum, *G.I. Joe*) who skates on thin air, immortal DNA that rules a galactic empire, and a royal wedding of danger to Earth that changes *Flash Gordon*'s exemplary template so nuptials are half an hour before the finale. Closer to the gothic sci-fi originality of *Dune* and *Babylon 5* than it is to fairy tale futurism of *Star Wars* and militarism of *Star Trek*, this movie of blatantly contrived spacer super-heroics remixes ideas and scenes from *Man of Steel* and *Guardians of the Galaxy* with a *Chronicles of Riddick* rivalry especially evident in its designer surplus of otherworldly details and class-war scenario.

Cringe-worthy comedy is only effective yet still heavy-handed in a labyrinthine bureaucracy sequence, intended to gain 'entitled' status for uneasy Earth-girl Jupiter Jones (Mila Kunis, *Max Payne*), that plays amusingly like the Gilliamesque version of a deleted scene from Besson's *The Fifth Element*. A brisk game of tropes with dizzying riffs and references, this often vivid but sometimes vacuous blockbuster is spectacular fun that's quite brainlessly entertaining. With every swish of her ponytail, our heroine of ultimate blandness closes the yawning gap between lowly domestic service back on Earth, with its occasional urban high-rise views of inspirational clarity, and a running escape bid from the exploding cityscape of her enemy's hideaway stronghold in planet Jupiter's great red spot, where Miss Jones finds her predictably laughable destiny. As everyone falls with an alarming frequency into a massive gravity well but practically nobody important or pleasant dies, accepting all features as spoofy is the best way to enjoy this ride, and the Wachowskian brand of *Cinderella* wish-fulfilment with plenty of cult-worthy appeal plunges all the way to splash-down in genre cliché-land.

"We have come for Geza Mott," announces Clive Owen, here sounding like he's asking to see the top geezer. Directed by Kazuaki Kiriya, maker of a likeable pair of tokusatsu live-actioners, *Casshern* and *Goemon*, **LAST KNIGHTS** (DVD/Blu-ray, 29 June) is the first English language picture by this Japanese filmmaker. It's a lavishly produced but only periodically spectacular adventure, troubled by longueurs of exposition, and stuck with a batch of utterly

"You have found the power which is rightly mine." A colourful romp brightly restored in HD, Terry Marcel's trendsetting **HAWK THE SLAYER** (Blu-ray, 6 July) was an early British entry to the 1980s cycle of traditional fantasy movies, a decade of screen magics that included *The Beastmaster*, *The Sword and the Sorcerer*, *Dragonslayer*, *Clash of the Titans*, *Ladyhawke*, *Krull*, *Legend*, *Willow*, *The Princess Bride*, *Hearts and Armour*, *Hundra*, two *Conan* pictures and *Red Sonja*, although John Boorman's magnificent *Excalibur* eclipsed everything before (and after!) it.

I first saw this at the cinema – on a double-bill with *Saturn 3* – and it remains a charmingly kitschy effort, re-released here in the wake of Jackson's *LotR* trilogy with its prequel Hobbitses. Hawk is a painfully obvious American hero (wooden and blank faced import John Terry aims for stoicism yet lacks any charisma) whose companions (a giant, an elf, and a dwarf) are blatant Tolkien borrowings. Jack Palance is top nasty Voltan, Hawk's evil brother/nemesis, scowling for attention or bellowing to be heard on distant continents, to enormous pantomime effectiveness. His villainy is bolstered by appearances from the likes of Harry Andrews, Roy Kinnear, Patrick Magee, Ferdy Mayne, Annette Crosbie, Warren Clarke, and other notable Brithespians in the cast of genre favourites adding further cult-worthy appeal to a production already assured of a place in cinema history by the incongruity of its disco-tinged score composed by co-writer/producer Harry Robertson.

Occasionally memorable images place this sword 'n' sorcery adventure midway on the subgenre's quality chart. It's not great fun but it is lively and uncomplicated by too much narrative as the revenge subplot is about all there is really. Sometimes it's inadvertently campy – particularly in its dialogue – and clearly derivative, but *Hawk the Slayer* is still better than most of the cheap imitators and tawdry bandwagon-jumpers (*Deathstalker*, *Ironmaster*, *Gor*, *Barbarian Queen*, etc) that followed it.

REDUNDOES: ALSO RECEIVED

Iain Carson's debut feature **RZ-9** (DVD, 18 May), expanded from his own short film *2020*, is a low-budget dystopian thriller about the differences or lack thereof between remote-control surveillance/assault drones and super-soldiers enforcing martial law.

PROJECT ALMANAC (DVD/Blu-ray, 15 June) reworks *My Science Project* (1985!) and *Continuum* (*Interzone* #257) to solve a disappearing-dad mystery via time-travel. It's another gimmicky found-footage/camcorder flick. Watch *Predestination* instead!

LATE ARRIVALS

CHAPPiE (Blu-ray, 6 July/DVD, 13 July). Sharlto Copley in Neill Blomkamp's story of a reprogrammed police droid. (*Reviewed by Nick Lowe in issue #258.)*

METAL HURLANT CHRONICLES (DVD/Blu-ray, 20 July). Twelve stories that each take place on a different planet, all linked by the Metal Hurlant asteroid.

contrived characterisations that unfortunately cripple its distinctive visual appeal.

Morgan Freeman essays priestly scholar Bartok, not long for this cold heartless world after his lordship is summoned to appear before the emperor. Heroic champion Raiden (Owen, the only star to portray King Arthur and quintessential American icon Hemmingway) rises to the challenge of defiance versus haughty arrogance in a cheesy old-fashioned sense only modernised here by the CG visuals. Kiriya just cannot resist including some kung fu stunts and samurai swordplay in battle scenes, while a roving camera adds energy to political speeches. There is an inevitable chess game in the lull between fighting bouts.

Perhaps too multicultural (Czech and Korean) to be a historical adventure in any realistic sense, this is a medieval fantasy owing rather more to *Game of Thrones* than *Lord of the Rings* in its vengeful underdog heroism to overthrow tyranny, and so restore dignity to a fallen master's noble lineage. Charitably viewed as an unofficial remake of *47 Ronin* coming in the wake of that admirable version starring Keanu Reeves, this is a thematic movie scrapbook of vague memories seemingly collected while studying numerous examples of its generic type. Final verdict: well worth seeing, but not quite worth paying to see.

BOOK ZONE

CRASHING HEAVEN
Al Robertson
plus interview

THE ART OF MAD MAX: FURY ROAD
Abbie Bernstein

THE GREAT BAZAAR & BRAYAN'S GOLD
Peter V. Brett

CHASING THE PHOENIX
Michael Swanwick

POSEIDON'S WAKE
Alastair Reynolds

SLOW BULLETS
Alastair Reynolds

THE DOLL COLLECTION
Edited by Ellen Datlow

COLLECTED FICTION
Hannu Rajaniemi

THE BOOK OF PHOENIX
Nnedi Okorafor

THE FREEDOM MAZE
Delia Sherman

DARK ORBIT
Carolyn Ives Gilman

EXPIRATION DATE
Tim Powers

SISTERS OF THE REVOLUTION
Edited by Ann & Jeff VanderMeer

CRASHING HEAVEN
Al Robertson
Gollancz hb, 368pp, £20

Set in the far future, the war between humans and AIs is over. Humans orbit what's left of Earth on an asteroid called the Station, run by the Pantheon: sentient AI corporations with a godlike presence. Their enemy is the Totality, a group of rogue AIs despised by the Station's inhabitants. Our two main characters are connected internally, offering a microcosm for the war's two sides. Jack Forster is a worn-down human outsider, rejected by his world for surrendering to the Totality and desperate to clear his name. Hugo Fist is the vicious virtual puppet that will soon take control of Forster's body. The two must journey together as Forster searches for peace and justice, unfolding a dark and complex conspiracy across real and virtual worlds.

And it's one heck of a journey. This main character pairing is incredibly well executed. The two characters don't want to be attached but depend on each other nonetheless. The playoff between them – in particular their internal dialogue – makes for both dark and comic tension. Forster himself isn't much to write home about but he works well in contrast to the larger-than-life Fist, one of the most striking and unique characters I've ever seen in a cyberpunk world. On the face of it, Fist doesn't seem to fit in this story – he is so vivid and strange, almost to the point of distracting. He can manifest visually, resembling something crossed between a *Batman* villain and my worst childhood nightmares. Even though I'd already read this extract on the back cover, I still wasn't ready for it when it happened in the story:

When Fist shimmered into being the official took a step back and swore. The puppet was surrounded by cageware that manifested as a virtual set of spinning silver rings, revealing the hiding fragments of his body. There were little black polished shoes, a scarlet cummerbund, bright red painted lips, a black bow tie, dangling, unarticulated hands and varnished shining eyes.

His personality, in particular his insatiable lust to conquer Forster, is just as terrifying.

As I read on into the "weave", the book's dark augmented reality, I found myself liking Fist more and more. He echoes our questionable interactions with the modern world, where striking characters threaten to take over us all the time: our digital selves. How many social media profiles are larger than life, narcissistic avatars bearing little or no resemblance to who we really are? Furthermore, his bizarreness gives us something the genre has been aching for: a unique AI. Let's face it, a malicious AI in the far future wouldn't be some Spock-like entity who quietly questions human nature. They would be something beyond that, something memorable and, at times, maybe even *someone* to feel for. Sure enough, as the book progressed, I found myself rooting for Fist more and more.

AL ROBERTSON: THE CORPORATE GODS

review & interview by Barbara Melville

Unusually for me, I don't have many quibbles. There are times where I got a bit lost and had to retrace my steps, so I would be reticent to recommend this to anyone who is new to SF. But overall, *Crashing Heaven* was a pleasure to read – it's packed with intriguing ideas, it's beautifully sculpted throughout, and the grim, hardboiled depiction of life on the Station offers a fascinating ethnography of digital life. And while I'd argue its setting, ideas and themes make it cyberpunk at the core, it can also be described as space opera, noir, dystopia, thriller and at least a dozen other sensibilities and genres that don't have neat and tidy categories. Add to that the slick characterisation and you get a story that is bizarre, intelligent and, above all, something new.

Tell us a bit about *Crashing Heaven*.

Crashing Heaven's about Jack Forster, an accountant of the future, and his sidekick Hugo Fist, a military AI that manifests as a virtual ventriloquist's dummy. They live on Station, a giant orbital habitat orbiting a ruined Earth. Station's ruled by the Pantheon, sentient corporations that are worshipped as gods. One of the Pantheon is persecuting Jack and Fist – they've got to work out which one and why, and do something about it.

Does the world really need more cyberpunk stories?

Absolutely yes! When I started planning *Crashing Heaven*, I wanted to write about things like pervasive social media, the ways that corporate entities affect us and how small-scale technologies can transform our daily lives. That led me very naturally to cyberpunk.

First of all, cyberpunk's very aware of media of all different kinds. It thinks a lot about what it means to live with them and how they can change us. For example it's one of the few genres that has fully engaged with advertising, understanding how deeply today's ad narratives define and control us.

It's also a genre that's fascinated by inequality, by the contrast between the smooth wealth of corporate life and the scuzzy improvisations of the streets, and by the ways that each manipulates, accommodates and transforms the other. Sadly, that's particularly relevant just now.

And of course it's about what happens when new technologies hit everyday life. It's a great way of telling stories balanced very precisely between the way we've always lived and the way we're about to live, which makes it a natural choice for talking about our rapidly changing modern world.

You've done extensive work as a copywriter. How does your copywriting process overlap with your novel writing process?

It's always surprised me a bit, but I've never had a problem combining the two. I'm very happy spending all day on a corporate job, then all night on a novel or short story. I think that's because they're two very different kinds of writing. As a copywriter, my big challenge is to sound like someone else. As a writer of fiction, my big challenge is to sound like myself.

And I've been very fortunate in the people I've worked for. I've been intimately involved with several major communications and technology companies – that's fed very directly into the writing. And of course all the work I've done with corporate personalities and brand values was a very direct inspiration for the way the corporate gods of the Pantheon present and see themselves.

You've been compared to Alastair Reynolds and William Gibson. Do you feel you share sensibilities with these writers?

Both of them were very influential. Alastair Reynolds' sense of the gothic hugely excited me. He's got a very strong sense of how shatteringly empty space is, and how all kinds of extreme psychological strangeness can flourish in that void. There's a lot of horror in his futures. That kind of genre-crossing was very inspirational.

And William Gibson is William Gibson! A remarkable writer, pulling together all sorts of different strands (Alfred Bester, John Brunner, Raymond Chandler, J.G. Ballard, Len Deighton and co) to create an immensely durable fictional template. I re-read *Neuromancer* a few weeks ago – it's a very sharp book indeed. It would still feel like the future if it came out today.

But of course, a lot of other people have fed into *Crashing Heaven*. I love Leigh Brackett's planetary romances – I hope that the gods and illusions of Station capture some of her brilliant colour. Ballard's sense of the creative oppressiveness of suburbia was key (what's an orbital habitat but suburbs in space?). Barrington Bayley and Charles L. Harness were also big influences.

There's a lot of non-fiction in there too. Anna Minton and Lawrence Lessig in particular helped me understand how corporate entities set the terms of our daily lives. And film, as well. *The Third Man* and *Dead of Night* were very important. Svankmajer's *Faust* showed me how wooden puppets could interact with our real world. Stan Brakhage's fractured explorations of memory were very important. And of course Charles Hawtrey has a bit part – he had to be in there.

***Crashing Heaven* is such a detailed and complex story. How did you go about building the world?**

A lot of it came from just looking around at modern life. Astonishingly advanced digital technologies mediated by intrusive, manipulative corporate presences sit in our trouser pockets and shape the way we live our daily lives.

Fetches are one example of that. In the book, fetches are digital ghosts, generated from all the social media content someone living in Station creates while they're alive. They came from thinking about all the online content we leave behind us now. It creates phantoms of its own – the virtual versions of ourselves advertisers use to choose which products to sell us when we're online.

And there are the gods of the Pantheon. I'm fascinated by the way we have a near-religious relationship with modern corporate and civil entities. There's something very ritualistic about people performing uncomfortable overnight vigils to be the first to access new Apple technologies, or passing through gateways attended by wand-bearing priests to ensure safe travel on aeroplanes.

And of course there's Hugo Fist himself. He manifests as a ventriloquist's dummy, and they're a fantastic metaphor for the way we experience the technologies that surround us. On the one hand, when we're not operating them, they're completely inert. They have no real existence independent of us. But on the other hand, when we do activate them, they can take on a very definite life of their own in more or less worrying ways.

As for the practicalities of writing the book, it's partially planned, partially improvised. I'd done most of the world development and sketched out a rough plot before writing it. A lot still surprised me, though. One example is Hugo Fist. He marched into the story in a very fully formed way – I hadn't planned him as a ventriloquist's dummy but then, when he first appeared, there he was!

And what prominent and frightening character he is! Were you worried Fist's larger than life presence might put some readers off?

Not at all! If people are scared by him, then I'll feel like I've done my job. But I hope they also end

up feeling some empathy for him. He's a pretty dark individual, but there are some very good reasons for that darkness.

My main worry when writing him was explaining why he was a ventriloquist's dummy. There aren't too many of those in science fiction. There's a passage about three quarters of the way through the book where you find out why he presents as a little wooden puppet. That's the exact point when I worked it out for myself. It was a huge relief to understand why he is what he is.

It is great to see a novel where the male and female characters are equally strong. Was gender inequality something you were consciously looking to tackle?

Thank you, that's lovely to hear! And I think it's part of wanting to write books that reflect reality. I live in a world where men and women are equally real and equally present. To not reflect that when writing about it would be to slip into the kind of partial, reductive fantasising that I really don't want to have anything to do with.

Finally, can we expect another novel from you soon?

Yes. I'm deep in editing *Waking Hell*, a loose sequel to *Crashing Heaven*, set about three years after Jack and Fist's adventures take place. It's about the past of the future. Elements of Station's deep history rise up to attack it, and the hero – a fetch estate agent called Layla – has to fight back.

As she does so we learn a lot about how the world of *Crashing Heaven* came into being. We also find out how fetch culture develops after the events of the first book. So it's really a book about how the dead live and what happens when the wrong people come back to life.

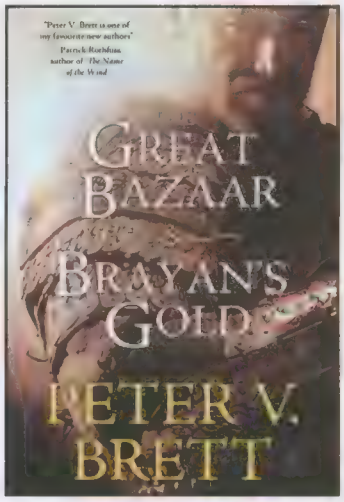
THE ART OF MAD MAX: FURY ROAD
Abbie Bernstein
Titan Books hb, 176pp, £24.99

The official companion book to the movie (reviewed by Nick Lowe in this issue) is a huge and handsome hardback packed with colour stills, storyboards and concept art. It has a foreword by co-writer/director George Miller (some of his own early sketches are included) and an afterword by co-writer Brendan McCarthy.

The book is divided into chapters that follow the film from The Wasteland to The Race to the Pass, with fascinating insights into its creation and shooting on every page: the scene setting, the stunts, the vehicles, Furiosa's prosthetic arm (production designer Colin Gibson's inspiration for this was images of survivors of the Hutu/Tutsi conflict), the makeup, the ornaments, the masks, the weapons, and we learn more about characters like Nux, Miss Giddy, Furiosa, and Immortan Joe.

Companion books often disappoint, but they are seldom as informative and fascinating as this one is. It's something to be treasured for its own sake but also as a reminder of just how much *work* went into the film.

from The Race to the Pass storyboard


"Peter V. Brett is one of my favourite new authors"
Patrick Rothfuss
author of The Name of the Wind
GREAT BAZAAR
BRAYAN'S GOLD
PETER V. BRETT

THE GREAT BAZAAR & BRAYAN'S GOLD
Peter V. Brett
Tachyon Publications pb, 192pp, $14.95

Stephen Theaker

Thousands of years ago humanity was almost wiped out by the nightly attacks of coreling demons, and saved at the last by the discovery of wards which turned the magical power of the demons back upon themselves. The monsters crept back to the centre of the planet, to regroup, recuperate and procreate, while humans slowly forgot about them. Eventually many thought the demons nothing but pub tales, so their Return (it is always capitalised) three centuries ago came as an unwelcome surprise.

This book collects two novellas about Arlen, previously published by Subterranean Press as collectible hardcovers. He is in these stories a young man with a passionate interest in rediscovering the lost wards, not least because he is pursued by a four-and-a-half metre tall rock monster he once managed to injure – accidentally knocking off its arm – which rises up each night and makes a beeline for his current location. A darned inconvenience, but of course he's clever enough to use it to his advantage at times.

Arlen has studied the books in the Library, and gleaned what knowledge he could, but it's fragmentary and he needs more. Working as a Messenger, he travels between the Free Cities, taking notes and making sketches of the demons, always on the lookout for new information, and for chances to test in practice what he already knows, or thinks he knows. Given time to prepare, Messengers can prepare a safe place to sleep in the open, surrounded by wards against which the coreling demons smash throughout the night, but that's no way to live!

Brayan's Gold takes place over three hundred years after the Return. Arlen, still an apprentice at this stage, and Curk, an older colleague, have taken on a challenging job, to transport a load of thundersticks – what we would call dynamite – to the most remote mining town in the duchy. It's ten nights of travel into the mountains, but the reward is fifteen hundred gold suns, an absolute fortune.

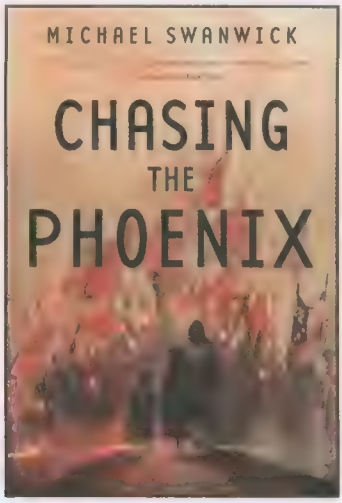
As each night falls, mist seeps "from invisible pores in the ground, reeking and foul, slowly coalescing into harsh demonic form", demons made of wind, rock and wood. The monsters aren't Arlen's only problem. There are bandits and betrayal on the route, he can't rely on drunken Curk, and he is entreated to help two sundered lovers reunite. To top it all will be an encounter with a snow demon that catches him out on the mountain, unprepared and unprotected.

The Great Bazaar is set four years later, between chapters sixteen and seventeen of *The Warded Man* (*The Painted Man* for UK readers). Arlen can now travel freely and is on the outskirts of the Krasian Desert. The merchant Abban has him searching for Baha kad'Everam, a hamlet long abandoned to clay and wind demons, which "drop like silent stones from a mile in the sky, snapping their wings open at the last instant to sever a man's head, snatch him in their hind talons, and take back off without ever touching ground".

Arlen is after the precious pottery that might with luck still be there unbroken: one pot from a master's wheel would make his trip. If he makes it back to Abban in Fort Krasia, there will be more trouble, but also the chance to learn the location of Anoch Sun, the lost city, ancient home of Kaji the Deliverer, who conquered the known world and united humanity in its first great war against the demons. A few scraps of defensive magic have kept humanity hanging on, but Anoch Sun might hold the secret of combat wards, for creating magical demon-killing weapons.

Brett's books are endorsed by Paul W.S. Anderson, which is a recommendation to me if no one else and, like Anderson's always enjoyable films, these novellas reminded me a bit of video games. Pulling a trailer of explosives up a bumpy road, fighting demons in ruins among smashed urns, questing for ancient manuscripts; these are pleasantly familiar scenarios to gamers. The novellas also share with his films an uncomplicated and earnest desire to entertain. I think they succeed.

In an introduction Brett says that he hopes these short adventure stories will offer newcomers a convenient introduction to the Demon Cycle series and its characters, while giving existing fans a broader look at his world and a fix between full-length novels. I can't speak to the latter, but for newcomers they are perfect; including a dictionary and ward grimoire helps with that. No book in my collection is fatter than *The Daylight War*, third in the Demon Cycle, and that had put me off reading it. Now it looks like a feast.



CHASING THE PHOENIX
Michael Swanwick
Tor hb, 304pp, $26.99

Lawrence Osborn

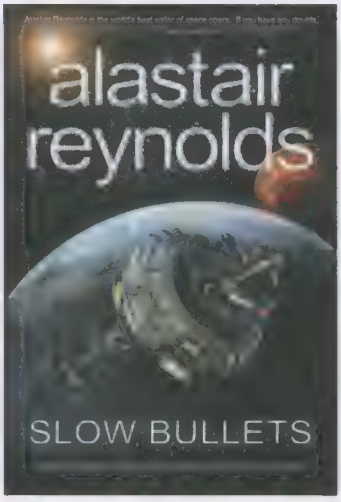
The latest from Michael Swanwick is set in a post-apocalyptic future which is littered with the detritus of its high-tech past. China, the location for the novel, has degenerated into a network of warring states. Enter the central characters – a pair of con men (or more accurately one con man and a con dog). The man is Aubrey Darger, every inch the English gentleman, lover of Victoriana, and admirer of Churchill. His sidekick is Sir Blackthorpe Ravenscairn de Plus Precieux (Surplus to his friends), a bipedal genetically-engineered dog possessed of human intelligence and canine senses. In spite of being thoroughly amoral, Darger and Surplus are a pair of likeable rogues on a par with Scott Lynch's Locke Lamora and Jean Tannen or Michael Chabon's Zelikman and Amram.

The story begins with Surplus arriving in the city of Brocade, dressed as a Mongolian shaman, and carrying the corpse of his companion Darger on the back of a yak. He is seeking the Infallible Physician who alone can restore Darger to life. In Brocade, he falls in with Capable Servant who leads him to the home of Bright Pearl, granddaughter of the Infallible Physician. She, it seems, has inherited his library and much of his skill. After some persuasion, Darger is duly restored. A few days later, Darger and Surplus are summoned to attend the Hidden King, monarch of the Abundant Kingdom and would-be emperor of a reunited China. Seeing the prospect of great wealth, they allow themselves to be pressed into service to aid the Hidden King reunite the warring states. Darger renames himself the Perfect Strategist. In that guise, he masterminds a series of outrageous and increasingly improbable victories against superior forces. However, in order to placate hostile courtiers, he must attempt to satisfy their increasingly contradictory demands, mostly of a matchmaking nature.

As victory becomes more and more likely, it becomes apparent to our heroes that the Hidden King is quite mad. In fact, he is a pyromaniac intent upon destroying himself and the city of North (formerly Beijing) in a thermonuclear explosion. He believes that his alchemical marriage to the weapon (his Phoenix Bride) in this fashion will result in his deification. Determined not to be vaporised, Darger and Surplus hatch a plot to assassinate the Hidden King and replace him with Capable Servant. As they put their plan into action, the plot begins to twist in a dramatic way. But Swanwick has not simply introduced a deus ex machina, nor is it merely a last-minute plot device to cut the Gordian knot created by Darger's increasingly complicated and desperate machinations. Rather, with the benefit of hindsight, it becomes clear that from the outset our heroes have been manipulated by forces that have long worked behind the scenes for the reunification of China.

I was intrigued by Swanwick's use of language in the novel, particularly his dialogue. In sharp contrast to a lot of recent science fiction and fantasy, at times there is a studied formality about it. Elevated is the only word to describe the language of a mechanic who speaks of "chastising" an apprentice. And yet, the characters can at times slip into much less formal mode as if they are briefly setting aside a public role. The impression that most of the characters in the novel are playing a public role is reinforced by the naming convention used in this post-apocalyptic China. Everyone apart from Darger and Surplus uses a 'descriptive' name sometimes describing a person's function or character, sometimes seemingly more aspirational, sometimes even contradicting or subverting what the story seems to tell us about them. So, for example, we have Powerful Locomotive, Terrible Nuisance, and Vicious Brute.

All good SFF novels should have shiny things in them, and *Chasing the Phoenix* is well supplied from the riches of Swanwick's imagination. We have surreal ancient technologies (crushing wheels, war spiders) and bizarre GM animals (eg the "mountain horses" of Surplus's Dog Pack). I particularly liked the idea of tutelary cheroots: You want to learn something? Just smoke the appropriate fag! And then there are the sinister AIs, which populate a substory within the novel. Implacable enemies of humankind, they live a ghostly existence in the remains of the Internet. They appear to bear a personal animosity against Darger and are possibly responsible for the Hidden King's madness. I also enjoyed the way Swanwick peppers the story with a variety of well-hidden cultural references including a paraphrase of a famous line from *The Mikado* and a passage in which Heraclitus meets Benjamin Franklin. To sum up, a thoroughly enjoyable romp.



POSEIDON'S WAKE
Alastair Reynolds
Orion hb, 729pp, £18.99

SLOW BULLETS
Alastair Reynolds
Tachyon Publications pb, 192pp, $14.95

Duncan Lunan

Recently I reviewed *On the Steel Breeze* by Alastair Reynolds elsewhere, and was impressed by how well it stood independently, although it was the second volume of a trilogy, following a first volume called *Blue Remembered Earth* which I have yet to read.

It would be impossible to say the same of *Poseidon's Wake*. Though the action begins in the Solar System, on Mars, moving to Earth and then Europa, it shifts relatively quickly back to the interstellar setting of *On the Steel Breeze*. I say 'relatively' because this is a long book. On page 597, describing an alien script, Reynolds says "there could be many hundreds of thousands of these grooves – more grooves than there were words in a book", but he's had a good try at it – 324,000 words at least, by my reckoning. But 'relatively' is also apt because in this fictional universe no travel nor information transfer is faster-than-light. Though the extraterrestrials can achieve a combination of both, at such high relativistic speed that to the subjects it appears instantaneous, it takes ten years to travel ten light-years, and human spaceships take longer.

On the Steel Breeze featured a fleet of colony ships travelling to Crucible, an Earthlike planet of 61 Virginis, twenty-eight light-years from here. There is a huge geometrical construct called the Mandala on the planet, built by an ancient race and monitored by giant robot spacecraft called the Watchkeepers. Unable to penetrate the secrets of the Mandala, the Watchkeepers had infected the artificial intelligences governing the Solar System to lure humans to Crucible, while concealing their own existence from us.

The story is followed through the eyes of the Akinya family, whose lives are prolonged by relativistic time dilation, illegal cloning, suspended animation, anti-ageing techniques and by merging with artificial intelligences, not all of them human technology. As one of them comments, "you're not dead until you've left a crater big enough to stick a name on". So I won't attempt to summarise the relationships of the main characters: suffice it to say that large periods of time elapse, but nobody is gone for certain.

In the interval since *On the Steel Breeze*, one of the Akinyas on Crucible has conducted an experiment on the Mandala which has blown most of one of the starships all the way to another mandala-bearing planet orbiting Gliese 163, seventy light-years away, from which they send a radio signal back calling for help. That signal is intercepted by the Watchkeepers and leaked to the robot intelligences which have taken over Mars, and they start machinations (literally) to get a presence to Gliese 163, forty-nine light-years from here. So the novel's beginning on Mars is at least a century after the end of *On the Steel Breeze*, long enough for the excision of the Solar System's corrupted AIs and the resulting traumas to be ancient history – and the continuation at Gliese 163 at least fifty years later still, with a variety of the previous characters picking up their new lives in the midst of renewed engagement between the Watchkeepers and the automated defences left by the M-builders. Some of the characters are no longer human;

some of them never were. The latter include genetically advanced elephants, still further enhanced by the Watchkeepers, with added human characteristics which made them a bit too human for me to believe.

Now read on…you can see why it takes hundreds of pages. What I've just told you isn't the plot, it's the situation into which the characters are pitchforked by different routes, and which they have to figure out while dealing with the practicalities of spacesuits for elephants, orbital dynamics for variously compromised ships, and the much bigger issues of the M-builders' big secret and the evolutionary dead-end which the Watchkeepers have slipped into (there are echoes on page 411 of Roger Penrose's *The Emperor's New Mind*). As a once-human being, recreated as an AI, says, "Try, just for a second, *not* to think like a thing made out of cells, with a lifetime shorter than some planetary weather systems". If I had a desk, I might hang that on a sign over it…but it's a necessity for reading a book like this. I enjoyed doing it.

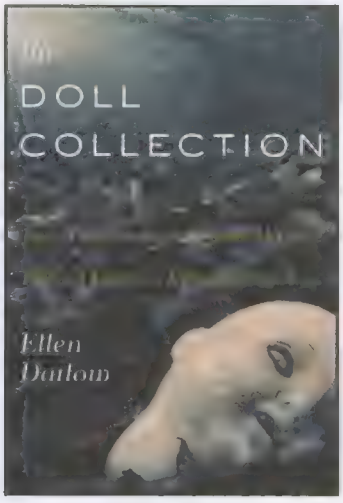
Slow Bullets is a very different read (a great deal shorter, for openers!) though the parallels are there if you look for them. Once again a lot of the action takes place in a compromised spaceship, and once again there are aliens around whose technology puts us in the shade – literally. They turn down suns to smother life-bearing planets in ice ages. There's no direct contact with them, so their motivation remains obscure, but it might be driven by a nihilism similar to the M-builders' in *Poseidon's Wake*.

The novel begins at the end of a religious war. As in some novels by Iain Banks and others by Gary Gibson, we never really find out what it was about, because the focus is on the traumatic effects on characters down in the firing line. The heroine is Scurelya, now insisting on being known simply as Scur; the nonbelieving daughter of a god-fearing family, whose enemies have had her wrongly conscripted. Already brutalised by the end of the conflict, she was captured and pointlessly tortured by a war criminal, then seemingly framed as a criminal herself. She wakes on a liner converted into a convict transport, where she's in storage among the worst of the worst; it's perhaps a weakness that we never find out how or why that happened. Was it just an admin error, were her family's enemies powerful enough to frame her for some atrocity, or was she guilty of one she doesn't remember? That ambiguity persists throughout, and makes it difficult for the reader to relate to her.

Having discovered that her torturer is aboard, she is driven primarily by anger and the desire for revenge in the situation which ensues – understandable, but something of a distraction in the crisis she and the other survivors have to deal with. The ship is in orbit around its intended destination, but hundreds, perhaps thousands of years have elapsed. The sun-dimming aliens have been and gone, and industrial civilisation on the planet has collapsed. They managed to get a spacecraft up to the ship, but all the occupant could do was to join the prisoners and crew in suspended animation, until awakened with the rest as the ship's systems are breaking down. While looking for her, as well as dealing with the manhunt and the conflicts among the survivors, Scur and her reluctant allies have to face the bigger problem that the ship is on a countdown to final systems failure.

The slow bullets of the title are implanted in soldiers so that their memories can be reactivated if they are severely traumatised in conflict. Injected into the body, they physically work their way to an unidentified nexus from which the bearer's mind can access them. Towards the end, it turns out that Scur's may be a replacement – which might explain why she's on the convict ship for no apparent reason, but then again, if she has become a completely different person, why send her into exile at all?

Over-engineered like much military hardware, the slow bullets can be turned to other uses. I won't reveal what bearing that has on the big problem, though remembering Arthur C. Clarke's 'Into the Comet' might provide a clue. The bullets' slow progress through the host bodies is normally accomplished under general anaesthetic, and releasing local anaesthetics en route for good measure; but done without either, and targeting the heart with an explosive charge, they become instruments of torture and murder worthy of Iain Banks (the jacket of *Walking on Glass* promises "cheerful descriptions of torture", though there's more of it in some of his other novels). Scur's *bête noir*, the war criminal Orvin, was doing that to his victims for entertainment by the end of the conflict; and since she's been a victim of it, you can guess that her revenge will be some variant on it when the chance comes. Nevertheless, what actually happens is unexpected, and ties together the various narrative threads of the book. Watchers of *Gene Roddenberry's Andromeda* may find the ending less surprising, perhaps, but it's none the worse for that. *Slow Bullets* has many fewer pages and a much less convoluted plot than *Poseidon's Wake*, but it would be a mistake to dismiss it for those reasons – in its own way it's an equally enjoyable read.



THE DOLL COLLECTION
Edited by Ellen Datlow
Tor hb, 352pp, $27.99

Ian Hunter

What is it about dolls? Somewhere in Hunter Towers is a horror anthology edited by the likes of Dennis Etchison containing a story where the lead characters have died and gone to hell, but hell is being inside a doll, an action figure or a Barbie doll. Children's playthings and you feel every twist and broken limb. Every knock, burn, hair pull. Inside a doll no one can hear you scream. Ellen Datlow's *The Doll Collection* is not all screams and horror. It's creepy; it's eerie; it's unsettling. Datlow has collected a stellar cast consisting of Joyce Carol Oates, Tim Lebbon, Stephen Gallagher, Gemma Files, Pat Cadigan and many others.

Datlow collects dolls and doll parts. Dolls hold no fear for her – pediophobia is the name for that, and in her introduction she gives us some examples from stories and films of creepy dolls that graced the works of Richard Matheson (particularly in the film *Trilogy of Terror* from his short story 'Prey') and William Goldman's *Magic*. Dolls have also been in horror movies, from the 1930s film *The Devil Doll* to the Chucky movies and, more recently, *The Conjuring* and its spin-off movie featuring the doll Annabelle. According to Freud's 1919 essay 'The Uncanny' our discomfort at seeing a doll is because it should be alive, but isn't. Masahiro Mori's theory from the 1970s of the "uncanny valley" is that things which look and move almost like humans make us squirm. If you didn't think the idea of a collection of doll stories was creepy enough then Datlow, Ellen Klages and Richard Bowes have also provided an accompanying doll photograph to go with every story.

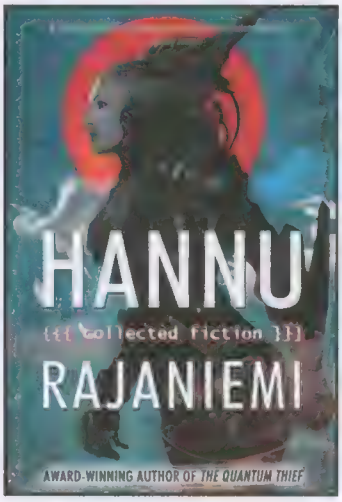
As for the stories themselves? In many cases the writers have taken the idea of a doll and jumped off in several different directions. In Tim Lebbon's bleak and claustrophobic 'Skin and Bone' the dolls here could be store-front manikins as one of two explorers finds the remains of a former camp and two life-size dolls that are featureless, but perhaps not for long. Creepy, and sad, is the revelation made by the ventriloquist's doll in Stephen Gallagher's 'Heroes and Villains' where the truth about a tragic fire is finally revealed years later.

Anyone who knows me will know how much I love the work of Joyce Carol Oates and she provides one of the stand-out tales of the collection in 'The Doll-Master' when a little boy steals the doll of his dead cousin, and when his parents take it away from him years later he must find other dolls to collect. In Gemma Files' 'Gaze' there is no doll as such, just an extremely rare "eye miniature" which might be one of a pair painted from the dead eyes of a witch – but is it such a good idea to collect such things and bring both miniatures together? Another stand-out tale, and probably the most entertaining in the collection, is Pat Cadigan's 'In Case of Zebras' as the voice and setting are just perfect. Almost as much fun is John Langan's 'Homemade Monsters' when a boy's obsession with the film *Godzilla* and unobtainable toys of the lizard-king leads him to transform a Captain Kirk doll into his favourite toy of all, until…well, read the story.

In a collection of excellent stories and really unusual takes on the doll theme we have a doll court communicating through the dreams of those who have committed crimes against doll-dom in their youth and must now pay for their actions in Richard Bowes' 'Doll Court'. In Richard Kadrey's 'Ambitious Boys Like You' two thieves break into a house to steal an old man's fortune in a fast-paced story that reads a bit like *Saw* meets *Hostel* but turns into something so much more.

'Word Doll' by Jeffrey Ford ends the collection and features one Jeffrey Ford who discovers the Word Doll Museum dedicated to the rather creepy practice of giving "word dolls" to children to help them work in the fields. He hears the story of one woman's revenge on a boy and the doll he was given. Before we reach Ford's tale we have fortune telling dolls and Shirley Temple dolls, and dolls that might be conduits for the dead to speak to the living and, while I did have a problem with a 1940s door-to-door salesman in London referring to Autumn as the "Fall" in 'Visit Lovely Cornwall on the Western Railway Line' by Genevieve Valentine, her contribution is the eeriest and most unsettling, especially for those passengers whose lives are going to be changed when they encounter a little girl and her doll.

Arguably the best anthology of 2015. Make sure you read it.



COLLECTED FICTION
Hannu Rajaniemi
Tachyon Publications hb, 238pp, $25.95

Paul F. Cockburn

Hannu Rajaniemi seemingly exploded like a supernova into the SF world with the publication of *The Quantum Thief* in 2010. Yet, like many an apparent overnight success, Rajaniemi had slowly built up his fiction CV with a range of short stories published in print (*Interzone* #218), online (*Futurismic, ARC: The Journal of the Future*), and even a limited edition three-story chapbook produced by Edinburgh-based new writing performance group Writers' Bloc, of which he was an active member. This limited edition collection from Tachyon Publications gathers many of these stories together, along with work published in several anthologies during the last five years, and even a few stories making their print debut.

There are many things which make Rajaniemi unusual, even in the world of English-language science fiction and fantasy. For one thing, he's Finnish by birth, and has already received that country's highest SF honour, the Tähtivaeltaja Award. Unlike most SF authors, he has also completed a PhD in string theory (at the University of Edinburgh) while his "other" day job – as a technology entrepreneur – has now taken him to California. In both fact and fiction, it's fair to say, Rajaniemi is without doubt on the cutting edge.

Apparently, as a young lad, Rajaniemi decided to learn English because he'd heard there was so much wonderful science fiction which no one had translated – or was likely to translate – into his native tongue. As anyone who reads his work or meets him in the flesh, it's clear that he learned English very well. And yet, because it is not his first language, Rajaniemi's English prose is distinctive; always tight and clear, even if what he's describing is not. (As anyone who has read his novels will know, blatant info-dumping is not Rajaniemi's style.) This isn't to say that his prose is bland; far from it. His writing has character, clearly revealing a genuine love of not just the English language but also the poetic potential in scientific terminology: "Primordial chaos reigned on the other side, a porridge-like plasma of quarks and gluons. In an eyeblink it clumped into hadrons, almost faster than the server could follow – the baby had its own arrow of time, its own fast heartbeat, young and hungry. And then the last scattering, a birth cry, when light finally had enough room to travel through the baby so the server could see its face."

And the man has ideas: oh boy does he have ideas. About how nanotechnology, and ever-evolving software, might go rogue and start reshaping the basic hardware we call reality. About vast AIs sown across the cosmos. In one particularly amusing tale, 'His Master's Voice', the main characters are a dog and cat – albeit seriously augmented with nanotech and significantly more intelligent than might be expected – out to rescue their imprisoned Master. In another, a character explains: "I need to choose, and I can't chose mermaid genocides."

Yet, for all the sense of wonder from seeing the potential in some of the worlds he creates, Rajaniemi is not afraid to twist science fiction's famed "wow" factor into a shiver of fear. Some of his ideas genuinely horrify: "Babies bonded with the godplague. Babies are cruel. Babies know what they want: food, sleep, for all pain to go away. And that's what the godplague gives them."

Admittedly, on occasions, Rajaniemi's tendency to combine compact, efficient writing with an attention-grabbing idea can be almost too distractingly clever, pulling you momentarily out of the story. "I don't know why a girl like Aileen would ever have taken an interest in a guy like me if it hadn't been for the fact that I used to be a god," for example, can't even hide behind the necessarily attention-grabbing role of being a story's opening line. However, while these stories are not found here in chronological order of publication, some simple checking of the copyright information at the front does suggest that Rajaniemi's become better at not being a science-fiction Oscar Wilde during the last decade or so; that particular example does come from one of the earliest stories in the collection.

It's interesting, of course, to learn that one of Rajaniemi's favourite stories of all time is Augusto Monterroso's 'The Dinosaur': "When he woke up, the dinosaur was still there." As he points out (in an introduction to the samples of his micro fiction which conclude the collection and perhaps hints of a future fiction form), Rajaniemi loves the fact "that most of the story happens outside the frame of those nine words, in the reader's head." That rather aptly sums up the core strength of this collection.

THE BOOK OF PHOENIX
Nnedi Okorafor
Hodder & Stoughton hb, 232pp, £18.99

Maureen Kincaid Speller

The Book of Phoenix is a prequel to Nnedi Okorafor's World Fantasy Award-winning *Who Fears Death*. As the title suggests, it is the story of Phoenix, "mixed, grown and finally birthed" in Tower 7 on Manhattan, two years old but an accelerated organism with the body of a forty-year-old woman. She is able to read a substantial book in a couple of minutes, plants grow unusually fast when in her presence, and her body's temperature has begun to soar. Later, she will discover other unusual abilities. Phoenix, as she finally comes to realise, is an experiment, in a building filled with other genetic experiments, many of which have gone horribly wrong. Her ultimate purpose will be to become a weapon. And yet, to begin with, not realising that anything is out of the ordinary, Phoenix is happy enough with her life. Things change after the death of her only friend, Saeed, when she realises that her home is in fact a prison, and determines to escape from Tower 7.

Her account of her experiences we hear from Phoenix herself, but in a roundabout way. Indeed, for all that the novel is ostensibly about Phoenix, the reader is well advised to also pay attention to that *Book* in the story's title, for this is also a novel about storytelling. Phoenix's own story is embedded within another narrative, set further in the future, in which an old man, Sunuteel, caught in a storm in the desert, discovers a cache of old computers. The computers were hidden by the Okeke, of whom Sunuteel is a descendant, at a time when things began to go wrong on earth: "just before Ani [the earth goddess] turned her attention back to the earth". The Book of Phoenix downloads itself onto Sunuteel's "portable", and he listens to it while he sits out the storm, a storm which seems itself to be something to do with the spirit of Phoenix.

It's not too much of a stretch, I think, to see this cave as some sort of repository for latter-day Dead Sea Scrolls, the computers hidden in haste and then left, their stories untold; the very title, *The Book of Phoenix*, suggests a flavour of the biblical, while much of *Who Fears Death* hinges on interpretations of the mysterious Great Book. As for Sunuteel, he is a recorder and a reciter, a man who speaks many dialects of Okeke, as well as a number of other languages. This in turn suggests that it is no accident that he has been brought to this cave at this time. We are also dealing with a character who proudly carries a copy of Roland Barthes' 'The Death of the Author' on his portable, although Barthes' perception that "the author enters into his own death, writing begins" will be vigorously challenged during the novel. The point being made is that once written, a story lives. It can be rewritten, yes, but the story itself also persists. And persistence and endurance are very much at the heart of this novel.

Alongside Phoenix's own persistence in understanding how she came into being, disentangling her true story from the lies told to her by the managers of Tower 7 and its sister towers in other US cities, we are also led to understand that Phoenix's own story has shaped the world that Sunuteel now lives in. However changed they might be, stories about her have lasted. Sunuteel is better qualified than anyone else to see the truth of this, however terrifying this may be to him, in a future shaped by Phoenix's actions.

The intricate storytelling forms that frame *The Book of Phoenix*, as well as the recognition of the need that everyone's stories should be heard, may seem strange to those who prefer their genre neat, but frankly, that is their problem, not the author's. Quite apart from drawing on traditional storytelling forms, and peopling her world with characters who are emphatically not white, Okorafor delivers a searing (almost literally so in places) commentary on big pharma, experimentation on human beings, the theft and misuse of genetic material, globalisation, companies that function way beyond the law, and all of this from the point of view of the people who are routinely on the receiving end, the people who struggle to maintain their humanity in the face of the appalling violence regularly inflicted on them. This makes for hard reading at times but it's rewarding work.

THE FREEDOM MAZE
Delia Sherman
Corsair pb, 267pp, £7.99

Jack Deighton

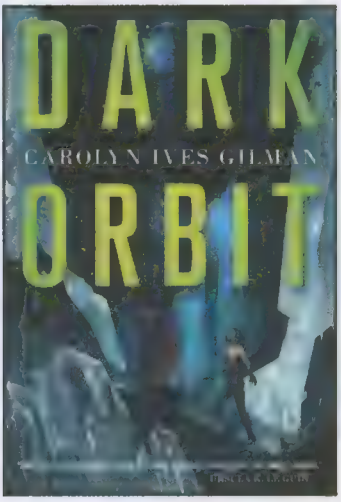
It is 1960 in New Orleans. Eleven-year-old Sophie Martineau is descended from the once grand Fairchilds and through her mother she has inherited the distinctive Fairchild nose. The family owned the Oak River plantation in Louisiana but has now fallen on harder times. Her mother is still fiercely proud of her heritage though, refers to the War of Northern Aggression, has inculcated in Sophie a suspicion of black men, and feels herself to be a Southern Belle. Sophie's failure to live up to her mother's standards of dress, tidiness and deportment is, then, a source of friction. To add to Sophie's woes, her parents are divorced and her father has married again. Her mother always harboured suspicions about her ex-husband's background – muttering darkly about a "touch of the tar brush" – has now had to get a job and has also signed up to train in accounting. To allow time for this Sophie must go to the ancestral home to be looked after by her aunt and grandmother for the summer. The signs saying "coloreds only" at a stopover and references to Negroes "the polite term" remind (or perhaps inform – this is a YA novel) the reader of the legacies of slavery.

At Oak River the former Big House is disused and the maze is in some disrepair. Sophie's only solace is a book of adventures featuring teenagers who travel back in time. Wishing to be anywhere else she explores the maze one day and hears a voice in her ear. This is a trickster she calls The Creature, which later surprises her swimming in a pool and tells her he "sits at the doorway betwixt might be and is, was and will be, here and there." At her request it manifests itself; as an odd looking podgy mammal with deer's ears. After one more altercation with her visiting mother she tells the Creature she wants to travel in time herself. The Creature obliges. The bulk of the novel deals with the consequences as Sophie finds herself on the Fairchild estate in 1860, mistaken for a slave sent up from New Orleans by estate owner Charles' brother Robert. The spoilt daughter of the estate, Elizabeth Fairchild, is immediately antagonistic towards her but her parents Mr and Mrs Charles Fairchild are less mistrustful and Sophie is given household duties to perform. In following these we are treated to a rather heavy-handed conversation about the likelihood of war with the North. Sophie swiftly falls ill and is allowed even lighter duties in order to recover. While in her delirium she hears a conversation between the Creature and a spirit called Papa Legba (who saves her from dying) about the dangers of travelling in time without preparation.

It must be said that, after initial incomprehension at not being recognised as white, Sophie slips very easily into the life of a slave, learning deference quickly and adopting slave speech patterns. It is in this context that the novel strikes a note that seems slightly off. Yes, the Fairchilds are "good" slave owners, though the overseer Mr Akins is not so reticent in this respect but, even if the prospect of a whipping is never far off, the slaves' conditions do not come over as being as grim as might be expected. Similarly the one whipping Sophie does eventually receive does not read as being as devastating. Sherman does highlight other gritty aspects of 1860 life, sanitary protection for instance is very rudimentary.

What plot there is kicks in when Elizabeth's suitor Beaufort Waters casts his roving eye – not to mention hands – on the slave girl Antigua. It is here that the Creature's purpose in bringing Sophie back in time is fulfilled. Sophie's resourcefulness and the usefulness of a Fairchild nose are instrumental in the resolution of Antigua's situation.

In all of this any fantastical elements are scant. The intervention by Papa Legba could be interpreted as a hallucination induced by Sophie's illness and the time travel is merely a black box. There is nothing speculative about it, no mechanism for it. It just happens. Sherman merely uses it as a device to precipitate Sophie's consciousness into the nineteenth century. Her purpose is to tell a story set in the slavery era and to seek to make it relevant to modern times. In this she succeeds well enough. In the end, though, there is as little sense of true jeopardy in Sophie's sojourn in the past as there was in the stories she so enjoyed in 1960. And it does seem rather to belittle the subject matter to make an overt comparison between freedom from slavery and throwing off parental shackles.



DARK ORBIT
Carolyn Ives Gilman
Tor hb, 304pp, £17.99

Ian Sales

Interstellar polities without Faster-Than-Light travel are not especially common in science fiction. Four examples spring to mind: Ursula K. Le Guin's Ekumen novels and stories, William Barton's *Dark Sky Legion*, Chris Moriarty's *Spin State* and sequels, and Alastair Reynolds' Revelation Space series. And now Carolyn Ives Gilman's Twenty Planets, in which people and materials are sent as beams of light from world to world and so experience time dilation from travelling at lightspeed. Scientists and explorers who regularly do this form "a strange sodality out of time", and are known as "Wasters".

Saraswati Callicot is one such Waster, an exoethnologist. Returning to Capella at the end of a five-year mission – but twenty-three years have passed on Capella – she is promptly recruited by an old mentor to join a team studying a newly-discovered planet fifty-eight light years away. The world is crystalline, so unlikely to be habitable; but it is also in a region of space containing "an odd concentration of dark matter". Ostensibly a part of the team to research its new management technique, Sara will actually be keeping an eye on a relative of her mentor, a woman called Thora who has only recently recovered from traumatic events on another world.

A handful of days after Sara's arrival, one of the security guards aboard the scientists' ship is murdered, and then Thora disappears during a trip to the planet's surface. She has been taken by humans who live underground in lightless caves and are entirely blind. They also perceive their world – including the waves of dark matter which frequently pass through it – in a unique way. The natives speak a slightly archaic form of English, evidence they have been cut off from the mainstream of human history for a considerable time. Unfortunately, it's not entirely successful, and makes it somewhat hard to take them seriously. However, life in the cave, and the solutions its inhabitants have put in place to in response to the absence of light, are ingenious and well-described. Gilman captures the claustrophobia of Thora's stay there very effectively.

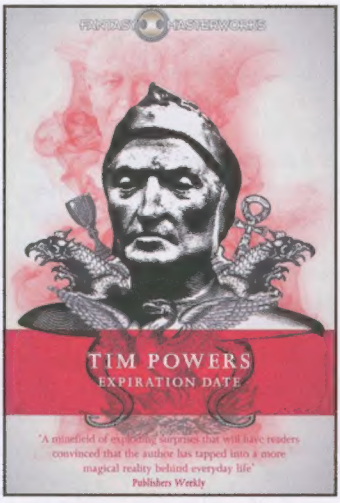
As Thora explores Torobe, the cavern village in which she is staying, she realises the villagers possess strange abilities which seem to contradict known science. The Torobians talk of visiting other settlements, yet their talk suggests they travel to other worlds and meet other races. It is through Thora's friendship with Moth, a teenage girl from Torobe, that the central conceit of *Dark Orbit* is eventually revealed. In part, Thora's ability to understand this premise is a consequence of the trauma she had experienced previously. This we learn from Thora's journal, which forms a second narrative interwoven with Sara's.

Thora's discovery that the universe and its laws are a consequence of perception – albeit not a solipsistic universe per se – and that the Torobians' blindness allows them to "manipulate" their reality, initially seems a bit wobbly for suspension of disbelief. But while attempting to duplicate the Torobians' ability to "wend", or travel instantaneously, even across interstellar distances, Thora realises, "Maybe it can't be observed, because if you observe, you prevent it." The Observer Effect, in other words. In quantum mechanics, the act of observation causes a wave function to collapse – so it seems plausible an absence of observation would suggest the laws of physics are a consequence of perception.

The scientists are obviously sceptical of Thora's report on the Torobians' abilities. She in turn is scared what use Capella's corporations would make of the knowledge. But when a dark matter event damages a vital component in the lightbeam equipment aboard the scientists' ship, Thora successfully wends to Capella to fetch a replacement.

One other aspect of *Dark Orbit* deserves mention, and it's something which seems to be a recent phenomenon in science fiction. The Twenty Planets are multi-racial and -cultural, and relations between them are handled with sensitivity and nuance. There is none of the white monolithic universes of last century's science fiction.

Dark Orbit is a fast read, but a substantial one. The central conceit may at times feel like borderline nonsense, but Gilman manages to keep suspension of disbelief in place for the length of the novel. This is a novel that would not look out of place on an award shortlist or two next year.


FANTASY MASTERWORKS
TIM POWERS
EXPIRATION DATE
'A minefield of exploding surprises that will have readers convinced that the author has tapped into a more magical reality behind everyday life'
Publishers Weekly

EXPIRATION DATE
Tim Powers
Gollancz pb, 400pp, £9.99

Andy Hedgecock

The rich invention, layered complexity and apparently effortless erudition of Tim Powers' work has established his reputation as a major writer in the field of fantasy. In *The Encyclopaedia of Fantasy* John Clute and John Grant call him "one of the most original and authoritative voices in the genre."

Powers' work is characterised by wittily contrived collisions of the quotidian and the supernatural. There are two main strands to his oeuvre: high energy romps in which figures from folklore wander into quasi-historical settings; and dark, deranged tales of urban fantasy in which myth and history leak into the mundane present with corrosive effect.

The Anubis Gates, Powers' best known and most accessible book, represents the sunny uplands of his writing. Fervently plotted, crammed with humour and horror and with a relentless logic all of its own the book is an enjoyable, inventive and picaresque adventure. *The Stress of Her Regard*, on the other hand, is from the depths of the author's imagination. This novel, Powers' most pessimistic, ambitious and critically lauded, focuses on the costs of acquiring self-awareness and wisdom – disillusionment and the burden of uncomfortable truths.

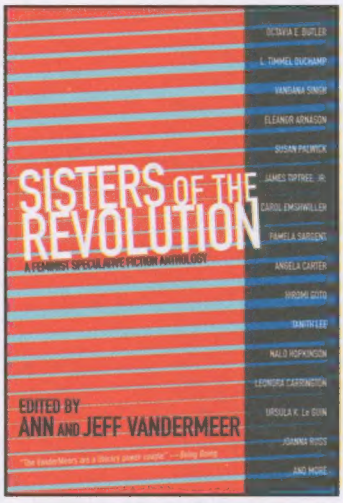
Expiration Date has been republished as a Gollancz Fantasy Masterwork to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of its first release. Set in the urban wasteland of Los Angeles in the 1980s and 1990s, the narrative consists of three strands of unsettling misadventure. Twelve-year-old Koot Hoomie Parganas, nurtured to fulfil the role of Theosophist Messiah, witnesses the murder of his parents, flees from a one-armed killer called Sherman Oaks and becomes haunted by the ghost of Thomas Alva Edison. Meanwhile, Pete Sullivan is mourning the suicide of his twin sister and striving to stay out of the clutches of Loretta deLarava, a desperate and malevolent film producer who rejuvenates her aging mind and body by snorting ghosts. And Angelica Elizalde is a lost and alienated psychiatrist, professionally and psychologically damaged by the unexpected outcomes of dabbling in folk therapies. The three narratives converge and climax with a spectacular confrontation amid the ghosts and faded luxury of the former Cunard liner Queen Mary, permanently moored at Long Beach.

The denouement is wonderfully written, and the union of the three strands of action is emotionally satisfying in the context of the story, but there is a problem with the structure of the narrative. It's inevitable the protagonists and their pursuers will bump into one another but it's frustrating that it happens so deep into the story. And, for me, there was a form of collateral damage inherent in juggling the three subplots for two thirds of the book. Complexity and subtlety are wonderful traits in a storyteller until they detract from the reader's engagement with the story. On several occasions flashback sequences suffered from a lack of clarity that forced me to backtrack and pick up points I'd overlooked. And the internal logic of some incidents is deeply flawed. This was a distraction from themes below the surface of the narrative, which is unfortunate because the symbolic and emotional layers of his stories seem to be of considerable importance to Powers.

On one level the story is a psychoanalytical nightmare. There are dead parents and a dead sibling: one character has lost all sense of certainty and buried her sense of self. Then there's an added layer of complexity in the form of the Fisher King myth. *Expiration Date* is the middle novel of Powers' Fault Line trilogy which explores the relevance of this Arthurian story to contemporary urban life. He depicts Los Angeles as a kind of psychic waste land, drained of positive energy by the spiritual vampirism of Oaks and deLarava. This ambitious idea is less well served in this novel than in its predecessor, *Last Call*, and its successor, *Earthquake Weather*.

In spite of these reservations *Expiration Date* has much to commend it. The cast of damaged protagonists is well developed, likeable and worthy of our concern. Even the key villain, deLarava, has a backstory that transcends the grotesque aspects of her nature and elicits our interest and sympathy.

And the book has the characteristic range of invention that won Powers the admiration of readers and critics. There is the ghost of Thomas Alva Edison sealed in a glass brick which is, in turn, concealed in a bust of Dante Alighieri. And ghost ingestion, a giant dead fish, an immortal amnesiac, Houdini's mask and the reanimated corpse of a former child actor.



SISTERS OF THE REVOLUTION
Edited by Ann & Jeff VanderMeer
PM Press pb, 352pp, $15.95

Elaine Gallagher

Sisters of the Revolution is an anthology of feminist speculative fiction, collecting stories from over forty years of women writing about women. The project, as it is explained in the foreword, is intended as an introduction to feminist fiction for readers who have not previously read such a collection. I don't have a great deal of background in feminist theory, nor have I done much reading of feminist fiction, so I have come to this collection as someone from the target audience. The VanderMeers describe feminism as being a conversation over the decades. This volume is intended as a picture of that conversation and how it develops.

The stories cover a wide range of themes with the unifying principle that they are commenting on women's position and treatment in society. The themes range from motherhood and family, through social roles and expectations, to power – how it is wielded, and by whom. A number of the stories are scathing attacks on male dominance over women. In one or two stories, notably Eleanor Arnason's 'The Grammarian's Five Daughters', there is no explicit discussion of social or power issues, and the point the story is making is on expectations of the reader as women and girls are put into roles that are commonly known for boys. Other stories deal with issues that affect women disproportionately to men. 'My Flannel Knickers' by Leonora Carrington, 'The Mothers of Shark Island' by Kit Reed, and Leena Krohn's 'Their Mother's Tears: the Fourth Letter' deal with ageing, beauty or motherhood as if they are prisons of expectation. Several stories, including Vandana Singh's 'The Woman Who Thought She was a Planet', Nnedi Okorafor's 'The Palm Tree Bandit', Nalo Hopkinson's 'The Glass Bottle Trick' and Tanith Lee's 'Northern Chess', deal with men's expectations of women and how their lives are either curtailed by having to conform to them or else how they go about subverting them. 'Sur' by Ursula LeGuin is one of my favourite stories in this collection, a gentle piece about how a group of South American women travel to the South Pole before any men do, but keep it secret.

And there are several bitterly angry stories in the collection; James Tiptree, Jr's 'The Screwfly Solution' depicts male sexual violence and aggressive sexuality, resulting in genocide against women. Pamela Sargent's 'Fears' is about a world in which sex selection has skewed the population so strongly towards male that women are a hunted minority. 'Gestella' by Susan Palwick is about a man who treats his partner as a trophy until she becomes inconvenient. 'When it Changed' by Joanna Russis is set in a society that has been female-only for hundreds of years until men arrive from another world and bring with them the expectation that they will now take over. 'The Perfect Married Woman' by Angelica Gorodischer describes someone who hates her circumscribed 'perfect' life so much that when she gets away from it she murders and creates chaos.

In recent years, intersectionality, the overlap of different privileges and oppressions including race and sexuality, has become an important part of feminism. Several stories include lesbian or bisexual characters. Three stories out of twenty-nine deal with race from the position of people of colour and one from a Jewish perspective. A later anthology might include a greater number of stories about non-straight or non-white characters; however, the issue is addressed here. One aspect of intersectionality, however, which has caused significant debate, has been the treatment of transgender people and non-binary-gender people in feminism. Many feminist writers in the seventies and eighties were negative towards trans and non-binary people and the three stories in the anthology which deal with them range from dismissal of the character who refuses to choose a gender in 'The Grammarian's Five Daughters', through scepticism in 'Fears', to hostility in Kelley Eskridge's 'And Salome Danced'. In this otherwise powerful story of female sexuality, the gender-changing main character is presented as monstrous when they display male characteristics. I would hope that a future anthology would include some positive stories about transgender and gender-queer characters as well as sceptical ones.

The stories here all examine aspects of women's relationships with the world. They address social and gender roles, sexuality, personal relationships, relationships with work. I look forward to reading more collections that address these issues from different perspectives.

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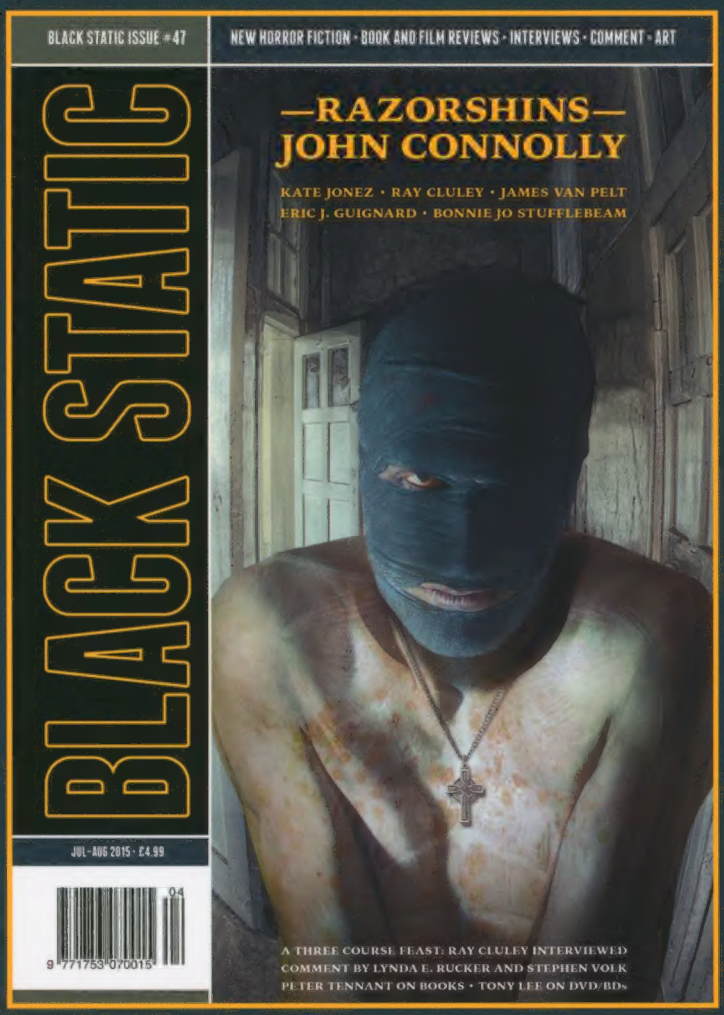
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